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APRIL 17

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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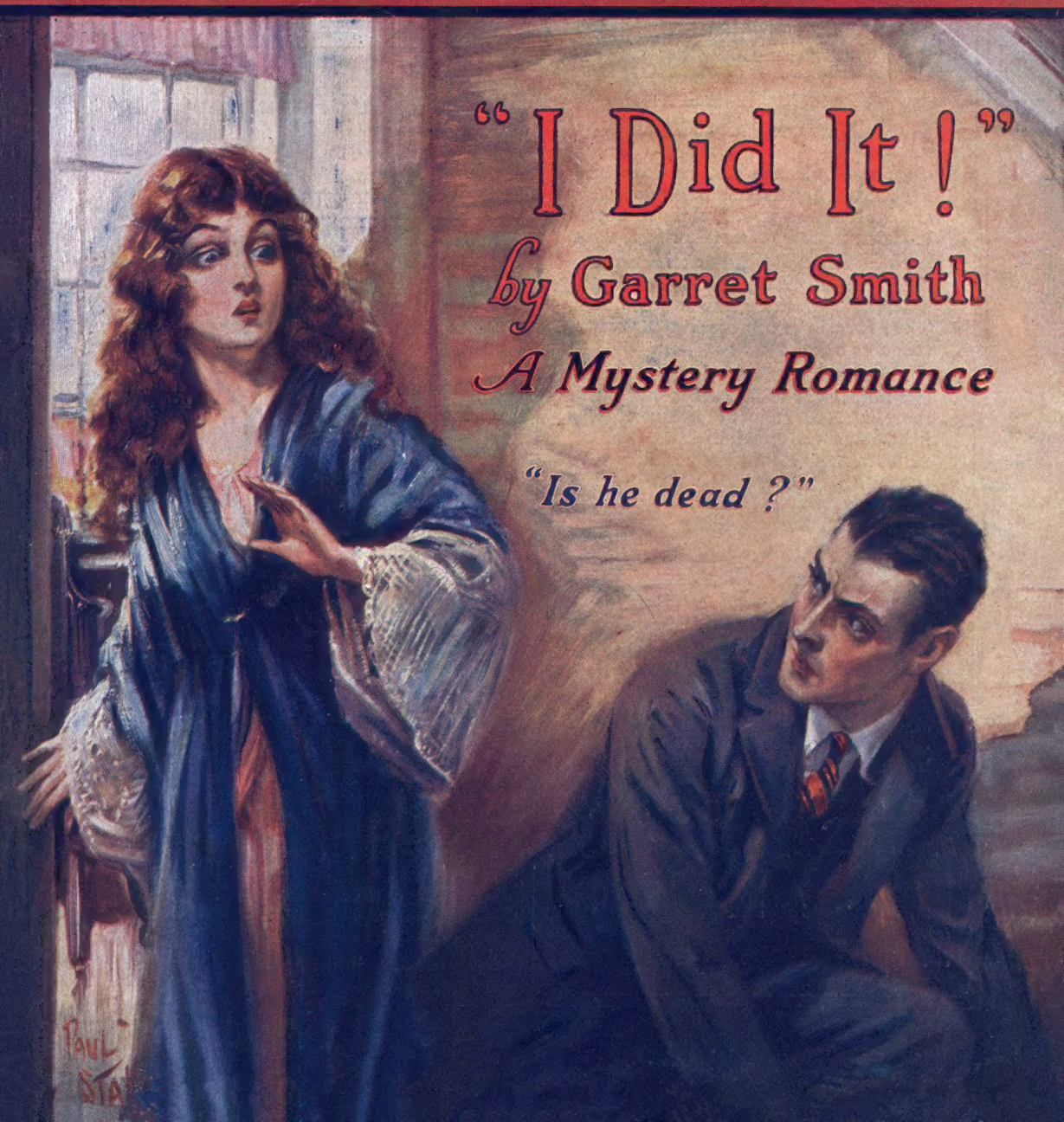

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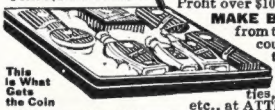

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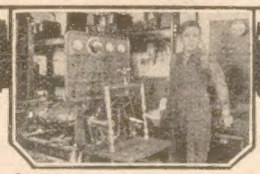

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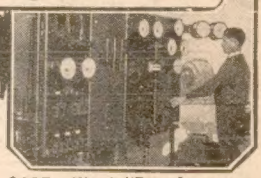

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXVI | CONTENTS FOR APRIL 17, 1926 | NUMBER 6

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By Charles Francis Coe

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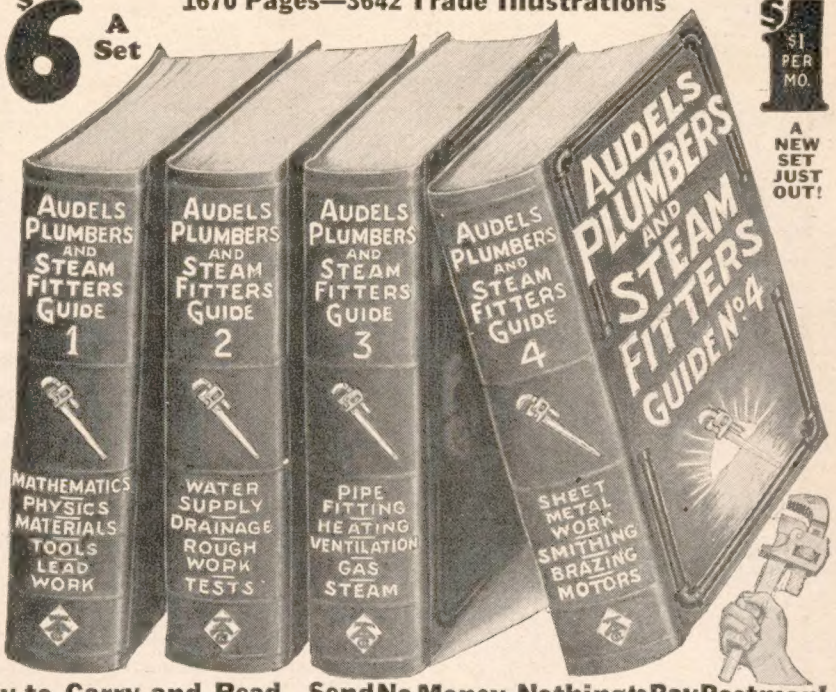
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WEEKLY

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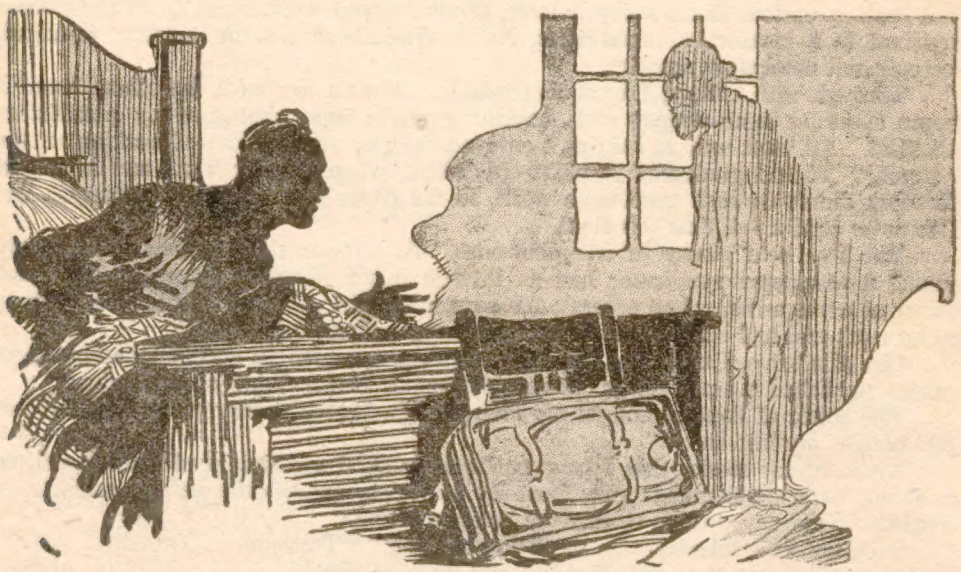

"I Did It!"

By GARRET SMITH

Author of "On the Brink of 2000," "After a Million Years," etc.

THE AUTHOR CASTS SIDE LIGHTS ON HIMSELF

PROBABLY the main thing ARGOSY-ALLSTORY readers want to know about us who write stories is, how did we get that way?

I began getting that way at least three hundred years before I was born when rebels and dreamers from France, England, Scotland, Wales, and Holland came over to America and intermarried.

Finally, as a result of all this, I was born, with a writer and newspaper man for a maternal grandfather; a paternal grandsire who made his living as a surgeon and wrote poetry for amusement; a musician for a mother and a father who was a dreamer and a rover.

I was turned loose in an old house full of books and a hundred acre farm full of trees, ponds, streams and hills—a view of Lake Ontario from the highest point in one direction and the city of Rochester in another.

Out of this raw material I began making stories.

When I was fourteen I wrote my first rime. At seventeen I burst into print for the first time, in a weekly newspaper, with a poem on the hundredth birthday of my great-grandmother, in which I congratulated my ancestor on living through a century in which liberty was more valued than the one on which I stumbled. For the next ten years I quite consistently made the poet's corner of the newspapers and comic weeklies.

Meantime, I was getting a necessary education and earning a necessary living. Incidentally, earning my living gave me more education and had more to do with laying a foundation for writing than anything I got out of my many years of schooling.

By the time I left college with a Bachelor of Arts diploma in my slippery fingers, I had been at various times a day laborer, farmer, tramp, book agent, peddler, kitchen assistant in a restaurant, bookkeeper, North Woods guide, tutor, teacher, principal, lecturer and newspaper reporter.

Through with college, I went to teaching. After a row with the school board I began majoring in newspaper work, beginning on the paper that gave my grandfather his start. All went well as long as I enjoyed the glorious freedom of working on the "street." Then I graduated to night city editor, where regular hours and myself at the desk didn't do such good team work, so the paper and I parted company. And I've never held a full time job since.

But I've held plenty of irregular ones. At various times I have respectively owned a newspaper syndicate; had an interest in an advertising agency; been part owner of a magazine, edited several; have taken a whirl at being detective, at politics, social work and had been publicity man for many various lines of work.

Out of all this, I have dug material for thirty novel length and innumerable short stories, published in some thirty different magazines in this country and England.

The editor of ARGOSY bought my first published story twenty years ago. He has just bought my last one.

Those of my stories that I have particularly liked and that readers have written in about, were the ones that grew from my most personal experiences and contacts, or were childhood day dreams ripened by years of living.

Such fantastic tales as "On the Brink of 2000," "Treasures of Tantalus," "After a Million Years," "Between Worlds," and "Cloud Hawk" were composites of boyhood dreams that filled my head while I was alternately browsing over Jules Verne, scientific text books in my grandfather's library and doing amateur field work in geology, botany and astronomy out on the hills.

Of my realistic stories, "Old Hutch," played in the movies by Will Rogers, was a village loafer I saw every day in my school town. I worked side by side for years on the *New York Tribune* with Old Grid, of "Buccaneer Blood." "The Host at No. 10" was suggested by several burglaries I covered while reporting, plus long talks with such gentry in Hell's Kitchen saloons. "Peter Buck" was an old neighbor. "A Fugitive Alibi" kept close to characters, scenes and incidents of my police reporting days.

This story, "I Did It," came to me bit by bit from a detective with whom I used to spend hours of loafing in a Greenwich Village hangout. He had been a State policeman in my old stamping ground in the Adirondacks, and I was able to live vividly in imagination through every incident he related. Finally when I came to set down this story on paper, it was as though I were simply recording experiences of my own. For that reason I hope my readers will like it.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED FORTUNE.

WALLACE TOWNE, in the very midst of the most poverty-stricken period of his life, had possessed an ample fortune for a full month before he became aware of the fact. Even then, he learned of it in an oddly casual way. Had Wallace Towne been a careful newspaper reader, the tangled and mysterious events that followed probably never would have happened.

It was a hot morning in early July. Manhattan was a steaming caldron of feverish discontent when Towne emerged at the

Grand Central and languidly dragged his tall, rangy figure toward his office in the next block.

"Wallace Towne—Real Estate," shone in gilt letters on the door he entered.

Towne sneered bitterly at the legend. It wouldn't be there long. About two weeks more, he estimated, and this venture of his would pass on to the graveyard of lost hopes. It was not at all unlikely that the sheriff would be among the pall bearers. Certainly, the mourners would include an imposing list of creditors. Towne was irritable and depressed.

Just inside the door, in the minute outer office, sat a strange young man of not very prepossessing appearance. Wallace Towne shrank inwardly. Callers these days were much more likely to mean creditors than clients.

"This gentleman wants to see you personally, Mr. Towne," whispered the switchboard girl following him into his private office. Her tone and manner shared her employer's apprehension.

"All right. Show him in," Towne directed, resignedly.

"My name's Jones," the caller announced. "I came in to see you because I am in a position to offer you a valuable service at this time. Permit me to congratulate you on your great good fortune, although, of course, you have my sympathy for the tragic way in which you came by it. Probably you've been too much disturbed and upset to think yet of how you will invest your money. That's where I can help you. I—"

But here Wallace Towne interrupted him.

"I'm sorry, but you've got the wrong man. I haven't inherited any fortune, and I'm not interested in investments."

Towne rose to dismiss his caller who looked suddenly crestfallen, but not entirely convinced.

"But," he demurred, "aren't you Wallace Towne, the nephew of Peter Laurette, who was murdered up in the Adirondacks a month ago?"

"What! Peter Laurette murdered?"

Towne was naturally horrified.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" exclaimed Jones. "Do you mean to say you hadn't heard? I wouldn't have shocked you like that."

"Don't be disturbed," Towne reassured him. "It's a shock, of course, but I hardly knew my uncle. He has never had anything to do with his family, so it's not a matter of great personal grief. Tell me about it."

"It was in all the papers at the time, but it wasn't made much of down here. It seems the last year or two of his life his mind was a little off. He took to wandering in the woods, and being gone a day or two at a time. The woman he had as housekeeper tried to keep him in, but he resented it.

"Finally he stayed away a week and they started a search. His body was found in a lake with the head smashed in. He was identified by the clothes he wore, but there was no clew to the murderer. I guess the case has been dropped."

Towne was silent for some minutes, recalling this strange relative of his as he remembered him from the one time he saw him five years before.

"But what is this about my inheriting money?" he asked, after a little. "My uncle was not supposed to have much, though he was a good deal of a miser. And he certainly had no love for me."

"Ah! There is where I have a pleasant surprise for you," exclaimed Jones, who now seemed to have recovered his aplomb completely. "I have a newspaper clipping here that tells the story."

He took from his pocket a column long article under the date line of Trevor Bend, New York, June 5, and handed it to Towne. This in part is what he read:

> A sensation was sprung here to-day with the reading of the will of Peter Laurette, who was found murdered in Bruce Lake a week ago. Laurette was supposed to own nothing but the small, sterile farm on which he had lived for the last twenty years, but it develops that he leaves property in good securities valued at nearly half a million dollars. This appears to be the result of lucky lumber investments in Canada in his younger days.
>
> Of this fortune, one hundred thousand dollars is left to Miss Marion Glover, a grandniéce, residing in Syracuse. The residue, nearly four hundred thousand dollars, goes to Wallace Towne, a grandnephew, whose

whereabouts are at present unknown. Mr. Towne visited his uncle briefly about five years ago, but it was understood they quarreled at the time. However, the date of the will is May 23, 1920, and it must have been drawn about the time of the visit while Peter Laurette was still in possession of all his faculties.

In case Mr. Towne is not living, all the estate will go to Miss Glover under the will. The will provides that, in the event of the death of either beneficiary without issue, his or her property will be divided equally among all living blood relatives of Laurette.

So far as known, however, Miss Glover and Mr. Towne, if the latter is still alive, are the only living relatives of the murdered man. Laurette came here twenty years ago from Canada, where he was born and lived till then. He ran away from home as a boy, it is said, leaving his parents and two older sisters behind him. After the death of his parents these sisters moved to the States and married. Marion Glover is the grandchild of one of these sisters, and Wallace Towne of the other.

It is understood that Peter Laurette's only effort to get in touch with his family since coming to this country was about the time of the making of his will, when he had Miss Glover and Mr. Towne visit him in turn.

Now the problem of the executors is to locate Wallace Towne if he is alive, or to confirm his death.

CHAPTER II.

TOWNE SEES A GHOST.

WALLACE TOWNE, his brain in a whirl with excitement over this sudden change in his fortunes, got rid of his caller as quickly as possible, thanking him perfunctorily for his information and promising absent-mindedly to give his investment offers a hearing after the estate was settled.

Then he gave himself up to a few moments of gloating. What a change, after years of struggle with adverse fortune, to walk into this ample estate! He remembered the rambling old farm house on the shores of the beautiful mountain lake. It could be made into a wonderful country place.

The July sun beat pitilessly through his narrow office window. An electric fan droned a monotonous discord to the roar of traffic without, but stirred up only a superheated breeze in which there was no comfort. But Wallace Towne was seeing a vision of cool pine-canopied mountains, and the sparkle of blue water.

Towne was only thirty. He had many years of pleasant living ahead of him.

Briefly, his benefactor, the crotchety uncle to whom he had made his one short visit, so unpleasant for him, flashed into his vision. Peter Laurette was like his nephew physically, tall, rangy and dark, still unbent in spite of nearly seventy years when Wallace saw him. But he had a hard, crafty face under his unkempt mat of white hair. In a fight many years before he had lost one eye, a disfigurement that gave his face a peculiarly sinister expression. Towne shuddered at the recollection.

He wondered about his coheir, Marion Glover. He had never seen her, didn't know whether she was young or old. Let's see, he thought, she would be his third cousin. He hoped she wasn't a cranky old maid. Well, he needn't have much to do with her.

But the practical question was, what to do now? His idea of the process of taking possession of an estate was quite nebulous. He called up his lawyer's office, but the lawyer was out of the city. Towne thought of telegraphing to Trevor Bend. He had no idea whom to address, however. Anyhow, this was Saturday.

He would probably get no reply from that out-of-the-way place before Monday. He was too impatient to wait that long. Besides, there had been too much delay already. He'd better put in his appearance on the ground as soon as possible, or he might be given up as dead, and a lot of red tape be involved in clearing up the mistake.

This once decided, Towne did some quick moving. An hour later he was on a train bound for the Adirondacks and Trevor Bend.

It was late afternoon when he left the main line train and began an hour's wait for the little stub-train that would take him up into the hills. There was a considerable group of fellow passengers likewise waiting at the little station, but Towne avoided them.

He was of sociable nature ordinarily, and

usually would have scraped one or two acquaintances to while away a day's journey. But to-day he wished to be alone with his thoughts. He had the feeling that if all these people knew who he was, he would at once be the center of attention. Towne was no lover of publicity.

Before the train came, a heavy thunder shower broke, a veritable cloudburst. The train was late arriving, and proceeded with irritating caution along the single-track line with its culverts choked by the downpour, and its rails awash at many points.

Consequently, it was nearly midnight when the train, three hours late, deposited Wallace Towne in a driving rain on the little station platform at Trevor Bend. He was rather embarrassed and much annoyed by this late arrival.

He had expected to get some definite information about his uncle's estate that evening, and perhaps be assured of his proper possession of the old house so that he could stay there that night. As it was he had no means of knowing whether any one was living there, or how he could get in if the house was empty.

And then there was the problem of where he would stay. The little fourth-rate hotel at the station was dark and silent. So were all the little groups of cottages scattered along the lake shore. A mile down the lake was a big summer hotel where he could doubtless be accommodated, but the Laurette farm was considerably nearer in the other direction.

After a moment's thought, he decided to try the farmhouse. He certainly had a perfect right there. If any one was living in the place, he'd drum them out of bed. If not, he'd either force a window or sleep in the old barn.

So he set off down the black shore road in the driving storm, guided only by the feel of the muddy ruts under foot and an occasional flash of lightning. Wallace Towne was used to the woods. In his varied wanderings he had spent much time in them. This was by no means the first time he had journeyed along a forest road in storm and darkness.

Yet, there was something about this particular journey that he relished less and less as he proceeded. Almost at his feet he could hear the rattle of the rain on the surface of Bruce Lake. In Bruce Lake the body of his murdered uncle had been found.

Towne was on his way to the dark, ghostly house in which he had seen that sinister old man alive. In the rattle of the raindrops on the lake surface he seemed to hear again the old fellow's dry, mirthless chuckle. Towne was not superstitious, but his flesh crept a little.

Again and again, as he hurried along, he fancied he heard, in a lull in the tempest, the echo of footsteps behind him. So persistent was this fancy, that once he stopped and listened breathlessly, his eyes trying to pierce the blackness. Then came another vivid flash of lightning, momentarily setting forth the details of the wood road as if at high noon. It seemed to his overwrought imagination that each slender dwarf cedar swaying in the wind beside the narrow track was the figure of a man following on his trail.

Towne cursed himself as a nervous old maid and went resolutely forward, keeping himself by supreme effort of the will from looking backward again. And so he came at length to the bend in the road flanked by a row of giant pines that revealed their solemn moaning ranks briefly in a lightning gleam. Behind them, he remembered, would be the low rambling house of Peter Laurette.

He waited beside a great trunk till another flash gave a view of the low gables and a glimpse of the driveway that intersected the tangled, neglected shrubbery of the deep dooryard. Up this drive he slowly felt his way to the low porch and front door.

Again his nerves were shaken by the ghostly presence of the dark house, the roar of the wind in the trees, the incessant flash and rumble of the storm. If any one were within, they would hardly be asleep during such an uproar of the elements. But in that uproar would they hear his knock? It actually took all his courage to try it.

His repeated raps brought no response. At length it occurred to him to try rattling the doorknob. To his surprise, as he did so, the door swung back. For a moment

he thought some one had opened it from within. But no one spoke. He heard no movement, and presently a lightning flash revealed the little inner hall empty. Evidently, the door had been left unlocked, a singular circumstance whether the house were empty or occupied.

A moment he hesitated, then tiptoed in and closed the door after him. At that he was fearful lest some one be aroused now and take him for a housebreaker. This entering a strange house at night was a dangerous business, he realized. He half expected to be greeted by a shot or an outcry.

But he waited stock-still and breathless for long minutes, and heard nothing but the roar of rain and wind, the rumble of thunder, the creak and rattle of blinds and loose windows. So at length he plucked up courage to feel his way cautiously to the stairway he remembered led from the hall to the bedrooms in the low half story above. He found comfort now in the noise of the storm, which would conceal any slight sound he made if any one were listening.

Foolhardy as it was, it was worth the risk to find dry shelter. He was chilled and wretched in his soaked clothing, and dog-tired from his journey and the attendant excitement of his day.

The room he had occupied on his visit five years before was the one he sought. It was at the end of the narrow upstairs hall. Fortunately the door of this room was wide open now, and a flash of lightning showed it was empty. With a sigh of relief he stepped in, and closed the door. Safe refuge at last!

While the storm still raged without, Towne took off his soggy clothing in the dark. He removed the contents of his pockets so that he could hang up his suit to dry with as little loss of shape as possible. Finally, he settled himself under the covers of a fairly comfortable bed, and soon felt drowsiness steal over him.

He could have sworn he had not quite lost consciousness when he was aroused by the sound of shuffling footsteps outside his door. There was a squeak of a hinge, the creak of a floor board in the room itself. Towne sat bolt upright in bed, the hair rising on his scalp. He tried to pierce the blackness with his eyes.

At this instant the room was suddenly illuminated by a flash of lightning. Wallace Towne's blood froze with horror.

In the center of the floor, staring at him with his one piercing black eye, stood his great uncle, Peter Laurette!

CHAPTER III.

A TRAGIC REALITY.

IT was only a flash and the room was black again. Then, while the following crash of thunder drowned all lesser sounds, Towne still sat, too terrified to move, staring into the darkness to see what the next flash might reveal. The vision had been unmistakably that of his great uncle as he remembered him, the gaunt face, hawk nose, the one gleaming eye, the mat of white hair, the nondescript, disheveled clothing.

But now the face was more emaciated, deathly pale. And, as a climactic horror, hair, face, and clothing were streaming with water. It was as if the corpse of old Peter Laurette had come up out of the lake in which it had been found and presented itself to Wallace Towne.

Now violent shuddering took possession of Towne. It seemed that an hour had passed since that illuminating flash. That terrible presence filled the darkness. He felt it bending over him.

Then came another flash. The vision had vanished.

Towne collapsed limply on his pillow, momentarily overcome with reaction. But only for a moment. Wallace Towne, as I have said, was not superstitious. This thing must have a natural explanation, his reason told him. His uncle was dead, and ghosts were an exploded myth.

He had gotten himself under control now and tried to laugh at his fright. This had been merely a half-waking dream or a pure trick of inflamed imagination, brought on by his morbid brooding induced by the suggestive surroundings, and touched off by some trick of light and shadow during the brief electric flash.

He reached for the matches he had placed on his chair beside the bed with his other possessions and struck a light to see if he could discover any natural object that would have caused the illusion. There was nothing to account for it. His clothes he had hung in a closet at the other end of the room. The door was shut as he had left it.

Cupping another lighted match in his palm he investigated the closet. There was nothing there but his suit. He even looked under the bed. Convinced finally that he had suffered a pure illusion, he was getting into bed again when he heard, or thought he heard, a shrill scream, and the sound of a fall.

He stood rigid, listening, but almost immediately another clap of thunder drowned other sounds. A wail of wind and the banging of a loose blind, he assured himself. Yet he opened the bedroom door and listened down the hall.

There was no human sound now, certainly. He did hear a door banging at intervals below and felt a puff of wind up the stairs. Simple enough! He remembered now he had failed to lock the front door which he had found so conveniently on the latch for him. Hence the seeming shriek and fall.

Towne laughed light-heartedly now. With calm assurance he went down the stairs, found the door swinging as he had guessed, and locked it. Then he returned to bed and lay listening until the thunderstorm and wind subsided and settled into a steady pour of rain. Finally, he fell asleep.

It was nine o'clock on Sunday morning, with the rain still falling steadily, when he awoke. After the first moment of confusion at finding himself in a strange place, the happenings of the night before came vividly back to his mind. On reflection the amazing vision of his dead uncle seemed as real as ever. It gave him a creepy feeling to think of it even in the light of day.

For a moment he wondered if there could have been a living intruder in his room. But at first he saw no signs of it. The little apartment was unchanged in appearance since he had spent a week in it five years before, the four-poster bed, the old walnut bureau with the cracked, spotted mirror and washstand to match, the one ladder-back chair with patched rush seat, the worn rag carpet, the striped blue paper, the cracked ceiling.

To be sure, at the point on the carpet where he had seemed to see the dripping form of his uncle, there was a damp spot. But his own drenched garments would account for that. His pocket contents still lay on the chair where had had left them, and his bag on the floor beside it.

He took his clothes from the closet and put them on, still damp and clammy. It was a most uncomfortable start for what promised to be a dreary day. Moreover, he was ragingly hungry. He remembered he had eaten nothing since Saturday noon except a sandwich at the junction that evening.

That led him again to wonder as to whether or not the house was occupied. It also suggested the problem of how to make his presence tactfully known. He tiptoed to the door, opened it a crack, and listened. There was no sound of stirring without, no scent of breakfast cookery.

He was still listening intently as he picked up his belongings from the chair by his bed to restore them to his pocket, when he stopped suddenly. There was something missing after all. He remembered dropping his soiled handkerchief on the chair last, having used it to wipe his still damp face and hair before getting into bed. That was gone, he noticed, as he started to replace it with a clean one from his bag. It had not fallen on the floor nor into the open bag. Curious thing! Perhaps he'd been mistaken about leaving it there.

But that was not all. He was sure he had put his big pocket knife with the other things, because he had opened the blade while he was undressing to cut a recalcitrant water-soaked knot in his shoe lace. He had laid it on the chair still open, thinking he might need to use it on the other shoe, but hadn't found it necessary. It was gone now, and careful searching around the room failed to reveal it.

Some one of flesh and blood had been in his room in the night!

Towne stood staring about him bewildered. What could it mean? There on the chair still intact lay his bill-fold with a considerable sum of money in it. Some strange night prowler had passed this by and selected two comparatively worthless articles. To be sure, the knife was an especially good one, a gift of Towne's father just before he died some ten years ago and accordingly prized. His initials were cut in a silver plate imbedded in the bone handle.

Perhaps the intruder had been gathering up Towne's possessions hastily and, being alarmed by the stirring of the sleeper, had fled before completing the job.

Still another rather fantastic theory occurred to him. He had been given to sleepwalking as a child. Perhaps, in the half-waking condition in which he had seemed to see his ghost, he had involuntarily grabbed up the knife and started out with it, accidentally taking the handkerchief with it as he went. He remembered going down to close the door.

Anyhow, he decided to explore the house and learn whether or not he was sharing it with anybody. He walked boldly out, making as much noise as possible, even affecting a cheery whistle, in order to give fair warning to any other possible occupant. Then, just outside the door, the whistle died on his lips and turned to a gasp of horror.

On the floor of the hall near the head of the stairs lay, face down, the body of a man, a dark pool of blood beside it! Protruding from between the shoulder-blades was the handle of Towne's missing knife!

CHAPTER IV.

THE GIRL IN THE CASE.

IN a flash almost as brief as that in which he had fancied he saw his uncle's ghost Towne's horrified eyes took in the gruesome figure that now lay under a beam of mid-forenoon sunlight streaming through the window over the stairs.

Of the identity of the dead man he had, of course, no idea. Even were it some one he knew, the face was completely hidden. But of one thing Towne felt sure as he pulled himself together and examined the body a little more closely. That mat of white hair and the worn, still damp clothing were very similar to the hair and clothing of his uncle's ghost, and doubtless the basis of that illusion. This man had entered his room in the night.

But did this man take with him Towne's knife and handkerchief? If so, some one else had used it. No man could drive a knife into his own back. Towne stared at the bone handle on which his initials were engraved and whose blade was sunk full length in the flesh of the murdered man. A handkerchief lay loosely about it, half soaked with blood—Towne's own missing handkerchief, probably.

At that there recurred to him his theory that he himself might have picked up the knife and rushed out half awake when roused by the intruder. Towne fell to trembling violently. Was it posible that he had been an unconscious murderer?

But again he pulled himself together. The first thing was to see if the man were still alive. Reluctantly he forced himself to stoop and examine the body closely. There was no pulse in the cold and already rigid wrist. The man had been dead for hours.

Towne was still peering at the silent form, when a low cry from the door of a bedroom down the hall pulled him sharp upright.

Standing on the threshold, her face blanched and drawn with horror, stood a young woman, her wide, staring eyes fixed on the ghastly corpse that lay almost at her feet. For the moment she seemed not to see Towne.

Even disheveled and distraught as she was, she made a picture of striking beauty in the frame of the doorway. A blue dressing gown draped her slender figure like a Grecian robe. A wave of auburn hair fell around her pale oval face and about her shoulders. The horror-stricken eyes were a deep violet under fine arching brows.

Suddenly she looked at Towne. "Is he dead?" she demanded in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes," croaked Towne through dry lips.

"Oh!" screamed the girl, and, turning, fled down the hall.

Towne heard her stumbling down the back stairs, moaning as she went. He would have followed her, but the dead man lay like a barrier between them. He could not get himself to pass it.

A moment he stood in dazed irresolution; then he hurried down the front stairs to find her. But as he neared the kitchen he heard the outside door slam, and he reached it just as the key turned in the lock on the outside. He wrenched impotently at the knob and shouted. But when he stopped to listen only the steady drumming of the rain answered him.

He rushed to the nearest window and looked out, just as the girl disappeared in the tangle of undergrowth that bordered the yard. He was making for the front of the house, when a thought stopped him, and for a moment almost stopped the beating of his heart.

Why of course! She believed he had committed the murder! She had fled in terror of him, locking the door in his face, and was probably on the way to get help. He must stop her and explain before she spread a false alarm. He would need her help in protecting himself.

But even as he started again for the front door he heard some one trying the knob of the back kitchen door through which the girl had just escaped. Perhaps she had already recovered her self-possession and returned. He stepped into the kitchen and listened, expecting to hear the key turn in the lock again.

Instead, after a moment, there came a heavy rap, and a masculine voice called: "Miss Glover! Oh, Miss Glover! Let me in!"

Again Towne was startled—first by this unexpected new arrival, and second by the name the man had called. Glover? He remembered instantly that his cousin and coheir was Marion Glover. So she was the girl who had just fled from him in terror? As he stood irresolute the knock and call were repeated.

The incriminating position in which Towne found himself suddenly overwhelmed him and all but unmanned him for the moment. Who would believe he had not committed the crime? Here he was in a locked house with the body of a murdered man, and in that body, shrieking its false accusation to the world, his own marked knife. Towne was almost persuaded that he in his sleep had himself given that fatal thrust.

But there was nothing to do but to admit the man clamoring at the door. He might flee by the front way in silence only to run into the arms of some one summoned by the girl. In fact, this man seeking admittance now might be some one she had already told of the tragedy. His call to her might merely be a blind. Once Towne fled, he realized, it would be as good as a confession of guilt.

The safest course, he decided, was to stand his ground, tell the truth, and trust that circumstances would vindicate him in the end.

So pulling himself together firmly, he strode to the door. "Yes?" he called. "Who is it?"

The man outside seemed startled at hearing a strange voice.

"Why, I'm Jim Holcomb, the hired man. Who be you?"

"I'm Mr. Wallace Towne, Mr. Laurette's nephew. I'll have to let you in the front door. The key's gone."

Towne, his heart beating violently, went to the front door, unlocked, and at last opened it. So there had been at least a fourth person about the house last night. Perhaps he could shed some light on the subject.

Around the corner of the house came as unprepossessing an individual as Towne had ever seen. He had at first sight almost a dwarflike appearance, due to his abnormally short legs and stooping gait. His body and arms were huge and powerful like a gorilla's, and crowned by a bullet head with a pair of crafty, light blue, bloodshot eyes and a bristling red mustache. He wore only a faded brown shirt, overalls, and moccasins. In one great hairy paw of a hand he carried a brimming milk pail.

He eyed Towne furtively, and seemed

rather ill at ease behind the torrent of speech into which he hurried.

"Wal, wal! So you're Mr. Towne! They'd 'bout given up your bein' alive! Miss Glover's been here since jest after the will was read, an' I reckon she's come to think she owns the hull property; mighty nice gal an' smart's a whip. I 'member you when you visited here five years ago; seen ye once down to the station.

"I was workin' at the Morton Hotel down there then—used to be bartender there 'fore prohibition. Worked fer Mr. Laurette 'most ever since, an' stayed on with Miss Glover since. Your uncle wa'n't so bad's lots of 'em made out. Give me a bad turn seein' him brought home killed like that, not that you'd ever know it was him 'ceptin' fer his clothes. Gosh!"

Towne broke in here as the hired man paused to indulge in a species of emotion.

"Were you in the house all night last night, Holcomb?" he asked.

Holcomb was plainly startled. He mopped his brow with his sleeve before answering.

"Who, me? No, sir! I never sleep in the house. I got a room upstairs in the barn. I used to sleep here when Mr. Laurette was alive, but Miss Glover, livin' alone here, didn't take to havin' a man sleepin' in the house, an' she couldn't seem able to git no woman help fer love er money."

"You didn't see or hear any stranger around the place then?"

Again the fellow looked startled.

"Who, me? No, siree. I don't never see ner hear nothin' once I turn in. Why? Anything wrong?"

"Yes—very wrong. You stay and watch things while I look for Miss Glover. She just got badly frightened and ran away. I'll find her and get help. We just found a man murdered upstairs."

Without further explanation, Towne started for the road, wondering breathlessly whether the gorilla man would pursue him. He had taken a scant dozen steps when he heard the milk drop to the floor with a clatter and splash.

"Hey! Wait!" he heard Holcomb call in a quavering voice. "Murder, did you say? Good Gawd A'mighty! Wait!"

But, without looking back, Towne dashed around the house and into the thicket at the point where he had seen the half dressed girl disappear.

CHAPTER V.

THE MURDERED MAN.

ABOUT the time that Wallace Towne disappeared in the forest in pursuit of his distant cousin and coheir, young Mr. Charles Ball came out of his luxurious room in the Bruce Lake Hotel, some two miles away. Charles Ball in everyday life was "Chick" Ball, one of the hardest boiled and most popular troopers in the New York State police force.

But none would suspect Mr. Charles Ball of being a crime hound as he strolled out of the elevator into the spacious lobby of the Bruce Lake Hotel, which somehow managed to retain an air of cheeriness even on a rainy Sunday morning. Ball's athletic young frame was draped in citizen's clothes of a cut and hue that added not a little to this general atmosphere of light gayety.

Nor did his care-free, sophisticated face betray the fact that he had just completed a month of the hardest and most discouraging work he had hit since going on the force and completed it with confessed failure.

All that Chick Ball had thrust behind him for two weeks. For, beginning this morning, he was on a fortnight's vacation. Furthermore, he was, during that time, the free guest of the Bruce Lake Hotel, whose proprietor took this means of repaying numerous past favors received at the hands of the trooper.

In the breakfast room he dropped down at a table opposite another free guest, Bill Lockhart, a roving newspaper man, at present acting as press agent for the hotel, and New York correspondent of the summer colony. Lockhart was a plump pessimist who viewed life askance through a pair of cynical-looking horn-rimmed glasses.

"'Lo, Sunny Bill!" Chick greeted genially.

"Solomon in all his glory!" commented Lockhart, ignoring the greeting and inspecting Ball's new outfit coldly.

The latter gave back the stare, grinning pointedly at the newspaper man's baggy, well tried suit.

"Says one best dresser to another," he retorted. "What d'ye know this morning, ol' hoptoad?"

"Many weighty matters, including the arrival of the graceful and accomplished Avery Van Saart and a half dozen other gilded morons. I shall pen some burning lines for the public prints about the epoch-making fact shortly. You, you four-flushing false alarm, promised me some real dope about the Laurette case before now."

"Have a heart! I'm on vacation. You can quote me as saying the case is closed, as far as the murder's concerned. But you, speakin' of four-flushers, you poor punctured balloon tire, you're the wiz that was goin' to pry out the missin' heir from his hidin' place with your mighty pen. How about it?"

"I think he and your murderer have agreed on a conspiracy of silence. Why not? They've both done the little Glover girl a good turn. It's up to you now, Chick, to marry that kid and give the yarn a happy ending. I'll split my space money on the wedding story with you, if you do."

"You wouldn't have to hire me for that job! Some little peach, I'll tell the great North Woods! I'd take her without ol' Laurette's money."

"You might lay yourself open to suspicion of having had a motive for the killing yourself if you married her with her money," suggested Lockhart. "Mr. Ball, where were you during the week between the disappearance of Laurette and the finding of his body?"

Ball blushed in spite of himself and tried to hide it under a grin.

"Try to find out! No danger of me gettin' mixed up that way, worse luck! Miss Glover's a highbrow school-teacher, an' I'm a roughneck cop, an' that lets me out with her," he countered.

"Speaking of motives," he hurriedly changed the subject, "that's the trouble with this case. I can only find one man who seems likely to have had any real killin' motive, and he seems to have an alibi."

Lockhart lost something of his air of blasé indifference.

"Who?" he demanded almost eagerly.

But Ball shook his head.

"Nothin' doin' at present writin'. I was after him on another charge at the time of the murder, but hadn't any real dope. I wouldn't dare name him, even to you. If it got out and I'm wrong, I'd be in Dutch. If I'm right, it would tip the fellow off. Don't you print a line about my havin' a suspect till I give you the K. O. See?"

"All right, Chick," Lockhart agreed resignedly. "Most of your information that is worth printing is marked 'For your information only, and not for publication.'"

"Mr. Ball! Mr. Ball!" chanted a page in the doorway.

Ball started up.

"Wanted on the phone, Mr. Ball," the boy told him.

A few minutes later Ball hurried back in great excitement.

"There's been another murder at the Laurette place!"

Lockhart came to life with a jerk. "The Glover girl?"

"No, thank God! But she's missing. It's an unknown man. Stabbed to death. They just phoned me from the Morton Hotel down at the station. Jim Holcomb, the hired man at Laurette's, just ran in there and reported. The big punch is this, though. Towne, the missing heir, has showed up. Holcomb found him alone in the house with the body. Told Jim the girl had run away, and then before Jim could stop him, he beat it into the woods. Now what d'ye know about that? Want to go up with me?"

"Sure! Right off."

"We'll hop my motorcycle. Let's go."

Before starting Ball telephoned the coroner down at Porterville, ten miles away, and that official agreed to start for the scene immediately.

"Got something to work on this time, but what a mess!" Ball told Lockhart as they mounted the motorcycle. "Hope to God nothin's happened to the girl."

"Something 'll happen to us, son, if you

don't look out," Lockhart gritted as the motorcycle shot out of the yard and slewed halfway around in the mud of the road. "There'll be another murder right here. You'll break both our necks."

"To hell with our necks!" shouted Ball as he let the motorcycle out another notch. Thereafter the roar and bang of the machine forbade further conversation.

At the Morton House, Ball slowed down. George Willis, the proprietor and local deputy sheriff, sat in front of the place in his flivver waiting for the trooper. Beside him on the seat slumped Jim Holcomb, his mean face still pale with terror.

"That feller Towne done it, Mr. Ball!" Holcomb quavered. "He's gittin' away every minute. He run into the woods. I c'n tell ye jest which way he went."

"All right, Jim. Come on, George. Step on it," Ball called and pulled the throttle of his motorcycle wide open again. The flivver followed.

A few minutes later the two vehicles churned into the driveway of the weather-beaten old Laurette farmhouse. The front door stood open, but not invitingly. As Jim Holcomb climbed out of Willis's car, Ball saw his eyes fixed on that open portal with a hypnotic stare of horror as though he expected the dead man to come out among them. The fellow seemed to pull himself together with great effort.

"Now, Jim, which way did this Towne go?" Ball asked.

"Right 'round the corner o' the house toward the woods yonder."

Ball followed the direction indicated. As far as the drive, the way led through a mat of unmown grass and weeds tramped flat by the frequent passage of the occupants of the house, and showing no separate footmarks. But at this point the drive was soft sandy soil, now converted into deep mud by the rain that still fell steadily. The rest of the way to the barn it was sodded except for narrow wagon ruts. Across the sandy portion of the road were two footprints, apparently of the right and left foot of a person striding toward the woods. They were already nearly obliterated by the rain.

"Here you are, George," called Ball to Willis. "Suppose you follow this trail and see what luck you have, while I look into the house with Jim and Mr. Lockhart."

Before going into the house he searched the driveway and the rest of the yard for other footprints, but found none.

"Now, then, let's see what's inside. Lead the way, Jim," he ordered Holcomb.

The hired man seemed to have recovered his self-possession a little by now; yet it was apparent to the policeman that the whole thing was a severe ordeal for him.

At the milk-splashed doorstep Ball stopped. The milk pail lay where it had fallen.

"What happened here?" he demanded.

"I'd come in from milkin', an' stood here when Mr. Towne told me about the murder. I was that upset, I dropped the pail."

Ball examined the threshold and the floor of the hall. There were faded muddy tracks there and on the stairs. Looking closer, he suddenly dropped to his knees and studied a small dark spot just beyond the milk splash.

"What do you think of that, Bill?" he asked Lockhart.

"Looks like blood, doesn't it?"

"It is. See, up the stairs, a drop or two on every step. And there are two sets of tracks on the steps, one going up, looks the same as the tracks out in the mud, and the other goin' up an' down is a little larger."

He glanced at Jim Holcomb's feet.

"Did you go up the stairs this morning, Jim, when your feet were muddy?"

"Yes. Up to see the—the—"

Jim stopped.

"The body, you mean? You didn't disturb it?"

"My Gawd, no! I come down quick's I saw it, an' ran down to the hotel fer help. Towne told me to stay an' watch things, but I figgered that was jest a dodge to give him a start."

"Well, let's go up an' see it," Ball ordered. "We won't disturb it till the coroner comes."

"I guess I'll wait down here," Holcomb demurred, hanging back.

"Come along, Holcomb," Ball commanded, sharply.

Holcomb hesitated a moment, then obeyed, sullenly. Slowly the three mounted the narrow stairs and stood in the little hallway above looking down on the pitiful crumpled body, lying just as Wallace Towne and Marion Glover had seen it a little over an hour before. Ball and Lockhart bent over and tried to see the face, but it was hidden from view by one arm of the dead man thrown around it as if to ward off a blow.

"W. T." read Ball from the silver plate on the knife-handle protruding from the man's back. "That stands for Wallace Towne all right, and there's a 'T' embroidered on the corner of that handkerchief. You're makin' good so far, Jim."

"He done it! I know he done it!" Holcomb reiterated. "Locked up here in the house all alone with him."

There was another step on the stairs at this moment.

"Here's the coroner now. How are ye, Dr. Brown?" Ball greeted. "Haven't touched anything yet. Haven't even identified the body."

The coroner, a gray, alert man, perfunctorily made certain of death.

"Been dead for hours," he announced. Then he and Ball carefully checked the position of the body and all the details about it, each noting the facts on the backs of envelopes.

"Now let's see if we know who he is," Brown suggested, turning the body over till the face was exposed. A moment the breathless quartet stared at the upturned features. There was a chorus of amazed exclamations, then a wild shriek from Jim Holcomb, and the hired man collapsed against the wall.

"I knew it! I knew it! It's him! It's ol' Peter Laurette himself!"

CHAPTER VI.

WAS IT A DOUBLE MURDER?

BALL recovered first.

"What do you mean, Holcomb?" he demanded. "You say you knew this was the body of old Laurette? How did you know?"

Holcomb was nearly frenzied with terror. He stared at the trooper dumbly until Ball shook him by the shoulders.

"I—I—knew the minute I laid eyes on him—looked like him."

"Why didn't you say so at first?"

"Didn't seem possible—him dead an' buried a month—you wouldn't 'a' believed me."

"You knew he was still alive? You saw him last night alive?"

Holcomb again nearly succumbed to his terror.

"Who, me? No—that is—I didn't believe he was alive."

Ball caught hold of his arm and shook him again, sternly.

"Brace up, Jim. Now tell us about last night. Where were you, and what did you see?"

"I—I went down to Willis's place after supper, an' was there 'bout an hour. Wasn't I, Mr. Willis?" he asked Willis who at this moment returned from studying the trail.

"About that, I should say," Willis agreed.

"Then I come home," the hired man went on. "After I put up the horse, thinks I, I'd go to the house an' see 'f Miss Glover's all right. But I see a light come into her room jest then an' ketched a glimpse of her pullin' down the shade, so I figgered she's goin' to bed an's all right; so I went back an' went to bed myself. But I couldn't sleep good on account o' the storm.

"I—I—mebbe an hour er two after I went to bed, comes a specially heavy clap o' thunder, an' I got up an' looked out to see if it struck near. Then—then—came another flash—an' I could 'a' swore fer a minute I saw Mr. Laurette standin' out there plain's I see you now. I hustled back to bed, an' lay most o' the night wonderin' about it. By mornin' I figgered I'd had a bad dream, mebbe. But I knew soon's I saw him lyin' there I hadn't been dreamin'!"

At this Holcomb broke into a fit of violent shuddering.

"Were you drunk last night, Jim?" Ball snapped.

"Who, me? Oh, no, sir."

"Was he?"

Ball turned to Willis.

The hotel man looked self-conscious, but declared his ex-bartender had been perfectly sober while at his place.

"Did he get a drink there or take any liquor from your place?" the policeman pursued.

"Now, Mr. Ball!" Willis said, in an aggrieved tone. "We don't sell liquor in our place to guests. We scrupulously observe the law."

"All right, Willis. Let it go at that. What do you make of it, doctor?" Ball asked, turning to the coroner.

"It looks as if there had been an error in the identification of the other murder victim," said that official. "Of course, positive identification is very difficult in the case of a body mutilated as that was and so long in the water. Apparently, the old man had been living in the woods till now, and wandered back last night? You say the two heirs were in the house last night, and have both disappeared?"

"Apparently. Did you make anything out of those tracks, Willis?"

"Nothin'. Didn't find any more. This rain's wiped everything out."

"I tell you, Willis. Suppose you start the hunt, and I'll join it later. Call State police headquarters and report for me, will you? We mustn't waste any time. They'd better get the dogs busy. There's no phone here; you'll have to go back to your place, I guess, but hurry."

"Now, suppose we look in the bedrooms," he suggested, after Willis had gone.

The smaller set of dried mud tracks, that corresponded to those found in the driveway, led to the bedroom occupied by Towne. His shoes having dried out during the night left no distinguishable tracks when he left. This deduction Ball pointed out to the others.

In the bedroom they found Towne's bag, and noted the contents. There were several letters that completely established his identity, and a pair of military brushes having on their backs the initials "W. T." in the same style of lettering as that on the handle of the knife in the back of Peter Laurette.

"Well," Ball summarized, "it's evident he slept here part of the night, anyhow, and the way in which the covers are neatly turned back indicates he got up deliberately. He dressed the same way. Here's a soiled shirt an' collar folded up neat on the dresser. He put on a clean shirt an' collar, and put the rest in a drawer here. He intended to stay. See?

"If he did the murder he planned to take care of the body and clean up before he was interrupted. Here's a pair of muddy shoes. He must have had an extra pair with him. Let's see if these fit the tracks in the hall and outside."

Experiments as suggested seemed to clinch Jim Holcomb's story that Towne had fled to the woods. When they returned to the house Ball called the coroner's attention to the stains on the stairs.

"Blood stains apparently," he agreed, after examining them with a pocket lense. Looks as though the murderer might have had a fight on his hands and been wounded. Let's see if we can trace his movements by them."

There were no signs of the little tell-tale drops anywhere downstairs except along the hall from the front doorsill to the stairway. Up the stairs they led, past the corpse, and along the upper hall to the room from which Towne had seen his girl cousin emerge that morning.

Lockhart noticed that Ball, the hard-boiled State trooper, turned pale and swayed a little as he took in the contents of this room.

In the center of the rag rug the trail of blood came to an end in a little group of clotted spatters. Beside it lay a heavy stove poker, its L-shaped end also dark-stained.

This bed, unlike that occupied by Towne, showed signs of having been hastily, perhaps involuntarily, vacated. The pillows were awry, the covers dragged half off, the ends lying on the floor.

A struggle had evidently taken place in the room. A chair at the head of the bed had been knocked over. Feminine clothing was scattered about.

Ball, for the moment, seemed dazed. Lockhart and the coroner went ahead, and made a careful study of the room.

"Must have been Miss Glover's room, all right," the newspaperman pointed out. "There are the initials 'M. G.' on the toilet articles."

"Wherever she went, she went in her nightclothing," the coroner added. "Here's a full set of woman's wear, apparently as she took it off last night. Looks pretty bad!"

"She's been murdered, too!" Ball groaned, rousing himself suddenly. "Search the house and the grounds, maybe she's only hurt. Quick! We're wasting valuable time."

He tore madly out of the room, and began a frantic peering into every nook and corner of the rambling old house from cellar to attic. Jim Holcomb lagged behind, and took only a perfunctory part in the search. Lockhart eyed him speculatively from time to time.

No further sign of the girl's movements was discovered, but two significant things were noted touching on the presence of Peter Laurette in the house that night. No other bed had been slept in, aside from those occupied by the two heirs. Nor did any other room show signs of having been occupied recently. The old man had not been staying in his house apparently since the time of his supposed death.

Furthermore, it seemed that he did not wish his presence known. The body was in stocking feet, and his muddy shoes were found behind the door in the downstairs hall. He had evidently been making a temporary call, and expected to steal quietly out again without having his presence known.

But the quest for the girl ended at the open front door whither the telltale blood stains led. Ball stood on the doorstep and pointed in dumb eloquence at the lake whose dreary rain-battered surface lay just beyond the road at the foot of the yard.

"I'm afraid that's the answer," Lockhart said.

"Yes," the coroner agreed. "Looks like a double murder sure enough. Sunk the girl's body in the lake and intended to do the same with old Laurette, but Jim Holcomb surprised him."

CHAPTER VII.

A BROKEN TRAIL.

IT was some minutes after this distressing conclusion was reached before Ball recovered sufficiently to go on with the investigation. It was Dr. Brown, the coroner, who roused him finally.

"Well, Ball, we'd better finish up our preliminary investigation before the search-party gets here. There isn't much left to do. Doesn't seem to be any doubt who did it. Holcomb's story seems to fit in with what we've seen. It's a clear case of the missing heir showing up at last and finding the testator still alive.

"He couldn't resist the temptation to make good the false report of Laurette's death and kill him for sure, thinking nobody'd know it. Perhaps he didn't know the girl was here, perhaps he did.

"Anyhow, he had to kill her to make away with the only witness. He didn't figure on Holcomb here and when he was surprised before he'd made away with the second body, he told the first story that came into his head and ran for it. Where you made your mistake, Holcomb, was in not stopping him."

Jim Holcomb, in the last few moments, had been rapidly recovering his normal loquacity.

"Wal, you see he struck me all of a heap, as you might say. I was surprised enough to find a strange man in the house an' more so when it turned out to be Mr. Towne we thought must be dead. Then, on top o' that he tells me Miss Glover's run away an' he's goin' after her an' then, jest's he's runnin' off, he shouts back there's been a murder in the house.

"I yells at him to tell me what he means, but he don't stop, an' he's outa sight 'fore somethin' tells me he's the man that done it, mebbe. First, thinks I, I'll run after him. Then I says to myself: 'Don't be a durn fool. Like 'nough he's got a revolver an' if ye make any move he'll pepper ye.'

"So I jest run upstairs an' see a body

that looks even from the back of it fer all the world like Mr. Laurette. That sure give me another bad turn. I run downstairs, an' never stopped runnin' till I got to Willis's place."

Lockhart came back from the shore at this moment.

"There aren't any tracks showing leading down to the lake," he reported, "but that proves nothing. There's a puddle straight across the road opposite the door that he could have walked through. The rest of the distance is turf and hard gravel that wouldn't show anything anyhow."

"But here's the trouble," Ball demurred. "There's only one set of mud tracks left by Towne, those going upstairs. We figured he had clean, dry shoes on when he came down so he didn't make any more tracks. If he carried the—the girl's—body out he would have tracked mud in when he came back."

"Unless he took a tip from the old man and went out barefooted," Lockhart suggested.

"That might be," Ball agreed. "He could have hurried into his shoes when he heard Holcomb coming. How about it, Jim? Did he have time to put on his shoes after he heard you?"

"Sure. There's somethin' funny I meant to tell ye. I come to the back door with the milk, an' found it locked still. Miss Glover generally unlocks the door first thing when she gits up so I can come in an' start the kitchen fire fer her.

"This bein' Sunday mornin' I milked first, thinkin' she'd wanta sleep a leetle longer. When I found the door locked I figgered mebbe she wa'n't round yet. I wouldn't 'a' disturbed her, only I couldn't stand there with the rain sp'ilin' the milk an' it had to be strained 'fore the cream begun to rise.

"Wal, anybody 'd had time to git up and dress twice 'fore he answered me. Then he says they ain't any key in the lock. I thought that was funny 'cause we allus kep' the key in the lock. I see now he was jest gainin' time to fix himself up."

The coroner nodded approvingly.

"And he finally let you in the front door? Was that locked?"

"Yep. I heard him turn the key jest's I got to it."

"And what did he say to you?"

"Wal, I see 'fore I talked to him a minute somethin' was wrong the way he looked an' acted. I asks him if they was, an' he says Miss Glover got scared and run away mebbe to git help, an' he was goin' to find her, an' there'd been a murder in the house, an' I was to stay an' watch things."

"Humph!" grunted Dr. Brown. "The girl couldn't have run away if all the doors and windows were locked on the inside. He wouldn't lock the door after her if he was going to run right after her."

"She might have run out the back door and locked it after her?" suggested Ball.

"Nonsense! A frightened girl running for help stop to do that? Anyhow, if she was running for help she'd have gone straight to the barn to git Jim Holcomb here."

"Sure," affirmed Jim. "I allus says to her, 'Miss Glover, if you get scared in the night, holler out the window for me, 'er come out to the barn a runnin'"; that's what she'd 'a' done."

"Let's go look at the barn," the coroner suggested. "Might be the old man or Towne, or both of 'em prowled around there. Did you look for tracks around there?"

"Yes. But it's mostly grass in the back yard. Nothing showing," Ball explained.

As they approached the barn Jim Holcomb seemed to get uneasy again.

"They couldn't anybody get in the barn in the night," he assured them. "I been keepin' it locked careful. Had so much trouble with padlocks rustin' out I put a good spring lock on the little door here a spell ago.

He was fumbling in his pockets as they reached this door.

"Wal, I swan," he exclaimed. "I knew I'd fergit an' lock myself out some time. Forgot to put the key in my pocket when I changed clothes this morning. That's a purty howdydo."

"Well. Break in a window somewhere," snapped Ball impatiently.

But at this moment came to their ears a honking of horns, a thrumming of motors,

and baying of hounds. A flivver containing two State troopers and a pair of dogs arrived, followed closely by Willis, and an impromptu posse of four other men he had drummed up around the village.

"Never mind the barn now, Jim," Ball countermanded. "We'll look into that later."

Then he motioned the coroner and Deputy Sheriff Willis one side.

"You understand, Willis," he said, "that I'm still in charge of this case, don't you? State police headquarters assigned me to it at the time of the first murder till further orders, and Sheriff Smith agreed that his office would help and follow my directions as far as hunting the murderer went. I had my vacation subject to cancellation if anything broke. So suppose we continue on that basis till we hear further from our chiefs. Is that all right with you?"

"Sure. You're the doctor," Willis agreed.

"All right then. I want you to stay and guard the house. Don't let anybody in the house or barn except under orders from Coroner Brown. Is that agreeable to you, doctor?"

"Entirely. I'll arrange now for the inquest and the removing of the body. We've checked on everything but the barn."

"By the way, Willis," Ball added. "I want you to keep Jim Holcomb with you. Keep him in sight every minute, and don't let him touch anything or go into the barn. Don't alarm him unless you have to, but if he gets obstreperous put him under arrest. I'm not accusing him, mind you, but I want to hold him as a material witness. If necessary, I've got another charge I can hold him on. I hold you responsible, understand?"

"Yes—but you don't think Jim done it, do you? He couldn't have."

"I'm not making any charges," Ball replied as he turned to greet the newcomers. But a few steps away he beckoned the coroner.

"Would you mind sticking around here while we're on the trail, and seeing that Willis carried out orders? He and Jim are pretty friendly, you know."

"I think it would be wise," Dr. Brown agreed.

The dogs were given a scent and started on the trail, the three troopers and Lockhart, the reporter, following. The dogs, however, were hampered by the rain that had fallen since Towne's flight and milled about more or less aimlessly, seeming to pick up the scent at times and then lose it again. The men spread out, searching closely for tracks, broken twigs or other signs of recent human passage.

After the hunt started, Ball slipped back unseen by any one and broke in a rear window of the barn. He was in there only a few minutes and presently rejoined the chase, leaving the barn as he found it.

It was Ball himself who found the first sign of the trail. He had plunged through the border of thicket that covered a rise of ground along the Laurette line and had come out upon the edge of a wide swamp through which a sluggish stream meandered into the lake. He skirted this as closely as the soft, mucky soil would permit. A few steps beyond was bottomless mud and quicksand.

He heard one of the dogs baying just ahead of him, and found the animal sniffing at tracks bedded too deep in the soft mud to be eradicated yet by the rain. The dog had stopped, afraid himself to go farther in the soft clinging slime. Yet the tracks, evidently, were that of a man who had himself plunged heedlessly on into the swale. The wallowing trail disappeared under swamp water a few feet further on. And caught in the branches of a huckleberry bush growing near the point where the tracks vanished Ball saw a man's coat.

He called to the others and began gathering dead brush and throwing it into the mud and water to make a footing. A few minutes later he ventured out on this precarious causeway and retrieved the coat. Under it, caught in a twig, was a torn fragment of blue silk.

Filled with horror he scrambled back to solid ground. In the pockets of the coat were letters addressed to Towne. This was unquestionably his coat.

"That's the answer," Lockhart broke the silence. "They're both buried out there in the quicksand. He must have taken the girl's body into the bushes and gone back

for the old man when Jim saw him. So he ran back and, in trying to bury her body in the swamp, he got caught himself. He tried to get his clothes off to lighten himself. See?"

CHAPTER VIII.

JIM HOLCOMB LIED!

PETER LAURETTE'S heirs had been robbed of their heritage by death.

That was the unanimous verdict of the little party of soaked bedraggled searchers. They stood for some minutes in awed silence and stared at the foul, sluggish swamp water. At their feet lay the proofs of the doom of Marion Glover and Wallace Towne, a tattered bit of blue silk and a muddy coat. The trail into the swamp led only one way.

Such trails always did. In all the history of the region, no one had ever blundered alone into Deever's Swale and come out alive.

The big bog looked its reputation. It was as villainous a region as one could imagine.

Once it had been a deep arm of the lake. A half mile wide. it extended back from the main body of water for a mile or so to where the stream tumbled into it from higher ground.

But centuries of deposit from the stream had filled it with shifting slime and seemingly bottomless quicksand. It was covered by a thin sheet of green-scummed waters, spotted by grassy hummocks, sickly lily pads, slimy reeds, and rotting driftwood. The stream had split up into sluggish, meandering bayous.

Black flies and mosquitos swarmed over the noisome mess. Rattlesnakes and copperheads infested it.

"A good place for a murderer to end up in," commented Lockhart at last, once more the cynical newspaper man. "A fine piece of poetic justice."

At his words Chick Ball shook himself out of the daze this discovery had caused. Again he was the efficient State policeman.

"Looks as though you were right, Lockhart, but we mustn't take anything for granted. Spread out, you men. Hunt for other tracks. Lead the dogs around over the bridge below if you don't find anything else this side.

"Here, Tom, you come back to the house with me. I want you to get a boat and tackle for dragging the swamp and lake. We'll make a try at finding the bodies."

He detached Tom Fargis, one of the other State troopers, and together they turned back toward the Laurette house. Ball took with him the coat and piece of silk they had found. Lockhart, after a moment of indecision, decided to stick with Ball, and followed.

As they neared the house, he got a chance to speak with Ball privately for a moment.

"Clear case, isn't it? Can I shoot in a story putting it up to Towne?"

"I'm not sure yet. I want to see Towne's body first. I want to be sure he was alive when he went into that swamp."

"What! But this hired man, Jim Holcomb, saw him start for it alive."

"Jim lied about one thing. Maybe he lied about others. Not another word now. See you later."

They found Deputy Sheriff Willis, Coroner Brown, and Jim Holcomb, the hired man, waiting where they had left them in the open doorway of the house.

Holcomb showed no sign that he knew he was virtually being detained at Ball's orders.

"Ever see this before, Jim?" Ball asked the hired man, holding up the blue silk they had found in the marsh.

Holcomb looked at it critically.

"Wal, that's the color of a kind of nightgown looking thing I seen Miss Glover have on the line once," he ventured. "I ketched sight of her with it on once, too, in the kitchen when she didn't know I was around."

"Probably a dressing gown or kimono," Lockhart remarked.

"Suppose we look in her room and see if such a garment is still there," Dr. Brown suggested.

But search both in Marion Glover's room and about the house revealed no garment matching the sample.

"Looks as though that was what she

had on when she left the house, whether she was dead or alive," concluded Ball. Then he told briefly what they had found in the marsh. "So that's what became of the girl, and Towne, too," he concluded.

"Now, before we separate, we'll have Jim climb in a barn window and let us have a look in there so as not to leave anything undone," he directed next.

"All right," Jim agreed. "I'll climb in a window. Darn stupid o' me to lock myself out like that. Must 'a' left that key on the chair by my bunk. Guess one o' the back windows 'd be easiest to git in. You folks stay here outa the rain. I'll holler when I got her open."

"Tom," Ball said privately to his fellow trooper, "suppose you sneak up through the bushes there to where you can watch the barn without bein' seen. If Jim goes anywhere elsé than to the barn, trail him and see what he does."

"What in thunder's keeping Jim so long?" he demanded after some ten minutes had passed. "He could 'a' broken into that barn about eight times by now. Let's go see."

But as they neared the barn the front door swung open, and Jim stepped out. He looked a little startled at seeing them already there.

"Oh, here you are!" he exclaimed. "Think I wasn't never goin' to make it? Wal, that window stuck like sin. Took me till now to get in."

They entered the dim, close mustiness of the barn and, as soon as their eyes became accustomed to the lesser light, began to look around.

Peter Laurette had farmed on a meager scale. Three cows and two horses comprised the live stock. Ball gave no sign of having been in the barn before. He inspected the animals and their stalls, and then spent some moments studying the old "democrat" buggy that stood opposite the stalls beside the single lumber wagon.

"Now, Jim, let's see your living quarters," he directed.

They ascended some rough narrow stairs to what had once been a granary, but now served as a bedroom for Holcomb. There was by a way of furnishings, only an old cot, a rickety chair, an improvised washstand, and a small cracked looking-glass. The bed was in disarray as if it had not been made up since it was last slept in. As they entered the room, Jim Holcomb pounced at the chair eagerly.

"There's that darned key!" he exclaimed.

Before pocketing it, he pointed at it triumphantly for all to see.

Ball seemed content with a passing glance here.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

"Jim," he said to Holcomb when they were outside. "We're going to depend on you almost entirely to convict this man Towne if he's still alive and we can find him. Tom's going down to the county seat to see the sheriff, and I want you to go with him. We can't afford to have anything happen to you while this case is under way. So I'm going to have you stay there with the sheriff till it's straightened out."

While Ball was making this explanation, Jim Holcomb looked flattered for an instant, then puzzled, and finally frightened.

"You—you don't mean you're arrestin' me?" he quavered.

"Now, keep your shirt on, Jim. If I were arresting you I'd accuse you of something, wouldn't I? I'm simply holding you as a material witness, as we often do in cases like this."

Before the other trooper started off with Holcomb, Ball called the former on one side.

"Tom, did Holcomb take all that time breaking in that window?" he asked.

"No. Didn't take more'n a second for him to climb in. He must have been in the barn all of five minutes before he opened the door for you."

After the rest had gone, Ball and Lockhart started a brisk fire in the kitchen stove and settled down before it to dry out their wet clothing and wait for the arrival of the men who would be sent to drag the swale for the bodies.

"Well, Chick!" Lockhart demanded after the edge of their discomfort had worn off. "Out with it. Have you got a hunch this ape-man, Holcomb, took part in the killing?"

"I don't know, darned if I do. He

knows something he's trying to hide, and he's been lying to hide it. Bill, when you write your story, don't write anything to throw suspicion on Jim Holcomb. I want to follow up some clews before any of his friends suspect I'm after him."

"But what did Jim lie about?"

"Well, Jim lied when he said he spent the night in the barn. He never went to bed at all, and he was away from the barn until a little while before he gave the alarm."

"Shades of Sherlock!" Lockhart exclaimed. "How did you figure that out?"

"Well, when we suggested searching the barn and he suddenly discovered he'd left the key in the barn and locked himself out, I got a hunch from that and the way he acted, he didn't want us to visit the barn. See?

"So after I got you fellows off on the trail, I broke in the barn and stayed in there just long enough to notice two or three things. Jim's bed hadn't been slept in last night. It was made up and the covers turned back, as though he'd got ready for bed and changed his mind. There was no key on the chair where he said he'd left it. The buggy had fresh mud on the wheels not yet thoroughly dried. The buggy box was full of wet straw. One of the horses was still damp, and had fresh mud on his flanks. See?"

"Well, I'll be damned! So he marked time long enough to hide the clews!" Lockhart exclaimed.

"Sure. When we send Jim to break into the barn it's five or ten minutes before he's ready to let us in. He tells us it took him all that time to get the window open. But Tom, who was watching him from the bushes, tells me it didn't take him any time at all."

"That gave him a chance to muss up the bed and plant the key on the chair."

"Yes, and carefully clean out the buggy, and put the wet straw in one of the empty stalls. The horse had been rubbed down, too.

"Now, why was Jim up all night and afraid to admit it? Why did he take a drive on a night like that, getting back probably after daylight, and try so hard to hide the fact? What had he been carrying in the straw in the bottom of that buggy?"

"Phew!" Lockhart whistled. "There is a set of puzzles for you! Have you doped out any answers yet?"

"Nothing reasonable. But this isn't my first suspicion of Jim Holcomb. I've been trying for a month to put the original murder on him."

"Oh, he's the man you meant this morning that you thought might have a motive, but seemed to have an alibi?"

"Yes. Jim was pretty close to old Laurette. I think he knew things the old man wanted kept dark."

"Well, spill it," Lockhart urged.

"I'll tell you in confidence now, so that you'll have all the elements, that I don't believe old Laurette was crazy, and that I don't believe he spent all of his time in the woods when he was away."

"How so?"

"A man can't carry on extensive investment and banking operations while he's hiding in the wild woods. And he can't carry them on successfully for any great length of time when his mind is on the blink. Old Peter Laurette had been secretly doing both for the last five years, particularly during the last two."

"The deuce you say! But the will and the documents found with it indicated that his money came from early lumber speculations, and hadn't been reinvested for years. Even the interest seemed to have been allowed to lie idle in the bank."

"Quite true. But I didn't take anything for granted. In trying to find some one with a motive I followed up his investments close as I could, thinking I might run on to some old business associate with a grudge. Well, I found practically all his present securities had been bought within five years. None of his present banking connections were more than five years old. In the last two years he had shifted the largest blocks of securities. What do you make of that?"

Lockhart thought over it for some moments.

"Well, he was a miser, of course, and we run across many a miser who has been so afraid of being robbed that he's kept his

wealth secret. Let's see, he began looking after his investments, you say, about the time he looked up his heirs and made a will.

"H-m! Maybe about that time he got dissatisfied with the way his money was invested. He might have got his new ideas from his nephew, Towne, when he visited him. What bearing do you find it had on either of the murders?"

"Oh, I don't know, of course, but the old man had a secret, and Jim was the most likely one to discover it and try blackmailing him."

"But how about the first murder? Did the murderer think he had killed Laurette? And how did the victim come to be in Laurette's clothes?"

"Some bum that had stolen the old man's clothes, maybe. Or perhaps the murderer wanted to give the idea that it was Peter Laurette who had been murdered. To do that he might dress the body in Peter's clothes and mutilate the face. But who would want to do that, and why?"

Lockhart, the usually imperturbable, jumped to his feet excitedly.

"Peter Laurette himself! And he did it to save his own skin!"

Ball, in his turn, looked surprised.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it's simple. Old Laurette gets into a row with an associate, and kills him. Now, somebody knows they are together, and if this man's body is identified, Peter 'll be nabbed as the one last seen with him. Whereas, if Peter makes 'em think he's dead himself, they won't look for Peter. All he has to do is to stay hidden for awhile."

"Doesn't sound very good to me," Ball declared skeptically. "It would mean staying hidden for good."

"Well, perhaps he was hard pressed at the moment and this was the best dodge he could think of in a hurry. Anyhow, he did stay hidden, didn't he, until he was discovered by the accident of being killed actually?"

"Of course, Jim's lie about the barn may mean nothing but that he was out all night on a spree, and is afraid to admit it," Ball conceded.

"Now, how would it work out if Jim had a hand in it?" Lockhart speculated. "Suppose, for instance, that Jim came home late and drunk, and went into the house instead of the barn. He might have found Laurette there and killed him deliberately, and then had to kill the witnesses. Or he might have attacked the girl, not knowing any one else was in the house.

"Then, perhaps Towne hears the rumpus, draws his knife, and goes to the rescue. Jim knocks him cold with the same poker he hit the girl with. He takes Towne's knife away from him, and just then the old man shows up. Jim chases him, and stabs him in the back.

"Now Jim has come to himself enough to realize he's in bad. His first impulse is to rush out and drive away. Maybe he chucks one of the bodies in the wagon to dispose of it. Perhaps he hasn't unhitched the horse yet.

"But along toward morning he sobers up enough to realize that he's sure to be traced and caught. He figures out a better scheme. He comes back and disposes of Towne and the girl in the swale. He makes a couple of footprints in the road to lead the way to the swale. Then he milks the cows and comes and gives the alarm. But he forgets to fix the barn up till afterward. How's that?"

"Fairly plausible. Still, the whole thing may be moonshine. If Jim hadn't lied about being out all night I'd say for sure Towne did it and let it go at that. Here comes the bunch to drag the swale. We don't need to speculate any more. The condition of those bodies when we find 'em 'll tell the story."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECRET OF THE SWALE.

WHEN Ball went out to meet the men and apparatus that had arrived in a motor truck from the station, two surprises greeted him.

In the first place, Deputy Sheriff Willis was on the truck and evidently in charge of the expedition of half a dozen hastily recruited citizens.

"What are you doing here?" Ball demanded sharply. "I thought you were at work in the woods."

Willis eyed him calmly, almost insolently.

"Well, you see, I got to thinkin' mebbe I better talk with the sheriff on the phone and be sure I was actin' with proper authority. Seems he figured when they let you go on vacation you was through with the case, an' hadn't any more authority. So he told me to go ahead with the search independent."

"Didn't Tom Fargis pick this gang?" Ball broke in, eying the outfit with ill-concealed disgust.

"Nope. Didn't have anything to do with it. You see, he called up his office, too, an' they called him an' the other trooper out there off on another case. Here's a note from Tom."

There was something distinctly triumphant in the deputy sheriff's manner as he handed Ball the missive. It was sealed and yet guardedly written. The note read:

> Headquarters have ordered Bradley and me over the other side of the county on an excise case. Sorry. Would you mind telling Bradley to join me at Hoffman's? I had to leave everything to Willis, who seems to have beaten it down here ahead of me.

Bradley was the other trooper.

Ball read the note thoughtfully, and considered a moment. This left him decidedly up in the air. There was something behind this, of course, but he couldn't make out just what.

While they were unloading the apparatus he got Lockhart one side and showed him the note. Lockhart had overheard Willis's report, and had been sourly studying the gang the deputy sheriff had brought with him.

"What do you make of it?" Ball asked him.

"I think you are up against the political ring, my son. It looks as though your hunch about Jim Holcomb was right. When you ordered Jim detained you started something. Holcomb's been a friend and handy man for Willis for a long time.

"Willis, as you know, is one of the wheel horses of the county organization. He doesn't propose to let Jim get into trouble. He's bound to protect him, and he's started wires going to do it. It looks as though he thought Jim was in a tight place."

"It might be they don't intend to let those bodies be found," Ball guessed. "If they were, their condition might tell a story that Holcomb can't afford to have told. If Willis doesn't want the bodies found they won't be. That's sure. Every mother's son left on the job, except you and me, are men that 'll do, see, and find just what Willis tells 'em to, right to a hair. This isn't just jealousy between State and local forces. It looks like conspiracy to hide a crime."

"I'd be willing to bet that not later than to-morrow you'll be called off the job altogether," Lockhart prophesied.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Ball assented. "Well, meanwhile, I'll stick around and watch the search. I'll do all I can to make it honest."

A rickety log trestle carried the lake shore road over the mouth of the swale. To this Willis drove the truck and unloaded from it a flat boat with the apparatus for probing the swale. The boat was shoved into the lake. Willis, with two of his posse, climbed aboard. Slowly they poled their way through the reeds and slime up one of the bayous toward the spot where the trail of the missing pair led. The rest, including Ball and Lockhart, followed along shore.

When they reached the point where their work should start it was fairly late in the afternoon. Ball was in a fever of impatience. Willis and his men, however, proceeded with the utmost deliberation. Until darkness put a stop to it the work kept up without results.

"Well," Willis announced. "Can't do any more to-night. We'll take another whirl at it in the morning."

While they were stowing their apparatus for the night, Ball and Lockhart departed.

"Any advice on what I'll send out to the papers, Chick?" Lockhart asked when they were out of earshot.

"Better tell the straight version as Willis and the coroner see it without any hint that anybody but Towne might have done it. Simply refer to my holding Jim Holcomb by saying he is held as a material witness as a matter of form till after the inquest, but that the authorities express them-

selves as believing he told a perfectly straight story.

"Now I want to take another look in the barn before I go. Willis has one of his men guarding the place, so I'll sneak around back. You go to the house and keep the guard busy while I do it, will you?"

Inside the barn Ball took little samples of dried mud from different parts of the buggy in which Jim Holcomb had made his mysterious night trip.

In his pocket now was a small account book that he had found under Jim's mattress. Suspecting that a record so carefully hidden might be of value he slipped it into an inside pocket with the idea of studying it later.

Back at the hotel, Ball shut himself immediately in a telephone booth and got his chief at State police headquarters on the long distance phone.

"Oh, hello, Ball!" exclaimed his chief. "I've been waiting for you to call me. Say, hands off that Laurette case. Go on with your vacation and forget it. You seem to have stirred up a hornet's nest in the tight, little ring over there.

"The sheriff and district attorney both had me on the wire. They say the case is closed, or will be as soon as the coroner turns in his verdict, declaring the fellow Towne is the murderer, and that he's already dead. You'd about thrown up your hands on the original murder anyhow."

"Now, listen, chief, nothing of the sort. I had the case where the best thing to do was to mark time and watch it, and Bruce Lake was the place to watch it. I still want to finish it. 'By, chief."

Ball then got Lockhart's room on the phone.

"Hello, Bill! Chick speaking. Add this to your story: State Policeman Charles Ball, who has been on special detail in charge of the Laurette case since the first supposed murder, announced last night that the case was closed as far as he was concerned.

"Believing that Towne is the murderer and that his execution has already been attended to by a Higher Power, he turned in his report to State police headquarters last night, and it was concurred in by his chief with the acquiescence of the coroner, sheriff, and district attorney. Mr. Ball will continue the vacation he was just beginning at the Bruce Lake Hotel."

"That's a fine line of bunk, but it goes if you say so," Lockhart drawled. "Now, what's the real dope?"

"Shut up, you darn fool! This is a public phone! If you hear anybody ask for me to-night, tell 'em I've gone to the bedside of a sick aunt over the other side of the county. Take any message for me, and hold it till I call you. 'By."

Then Chick Ball slipped out a side door, got a sandwich at the "hot dog" stand a half mile away, and by a circuitous route returned secretly on foot to the Laurette house. Then working his way as silently as an Indian into the bush, he proceeded toward the spot where they had been probing for the bodies that afternoon.

He had rather expected to find one of Willis's men on guard there. His only hope of being able to accomplish anything was that the guard might be asleep or a person easily manipulated with plausible talk. This guard he came upon sooner than he had expected, an almost imperceptible shadow some yards from the spot Ball sought. The trooper barely escaped detection.

But he was not at all prepared for what he saw a moment later, after he had wriggled silently past the guard. Out over the swale was a low circle of light marking a spot about four feet in diameter. It rested partly on the mud and water, and partly on the end of a flat boat.

Now two pairs of hands and naked forearms appeared in the light over the edge of the scow.

As Ball watched breathlessly he heard a half suppressed oath in a familiar voice. Then the face of Deputy Sheriff George Willis appeared in the circle of light.

"We got it. Douse the light," Willis commanded.

The light went out. Ball heard a splash and shower of drops as some sizable object was drawn from the water, then the thud of something heavy falling in the bottom of the scow. A moment later he heard the boat being poled away.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Fighting Devil

By HAROLD DE POLO

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

THE HERITAGE.

HE came of a fighting breed, did Shane. Back in the Green Isle, where it was said that the O'Hara blood was that of kings, the man who would dispute it was either a fool or a suicide.

It was Dennis O'Hara who, in the year 1849, heeded the gold call that came from the California hills.

Like those of his name before him, luck was with him, not to mention a good bit of persistence and courage. With the dust dug from the earth during the first year—as well as a not to be scorned amount taken across the gaming table—he hied himself to Arizona and bought a cozy ranch, with wide acres and verdant valley, where he rebuilt the downtrodden house.

There was reason for this. He did not go alone. He took with him, as his bride, the orphaned daughter of a proud line of Spanish hidalgos—one Señorita Mercedes de Acosta y Valencia.

The heir to the union, named Terence, in turn added onto the ranch and broadened its lands. You may judge that he was capable of this, for, coupled with the adventurous blood of his dead father, there also coursed through his veins that of his living mother, who boasted of Conquistador stock.

And when he, in turn, brought the daughter of a hardy pioneer rancher to his home as wife, it can easily be seen that Shane came of a fighting breed.

As his father often said, here was a chance for blood to tell, if it ever would.

And the youngster proved, right early, that he had held no particular aversion to physical encounters. By the time he was six he could thrash any other boy up to ten—or sometimes more.

Thousands of cattle now bore the O'Hara brand, and what amounted to a veritable little town had sprung up around the original homestead. Shane, however, showed himself fair. He never molested or provoked; but let one of the numerous offspring of his father's many workers start anything, or let them display a streak of bully toward a weaker man, and he was at them like an enraged wild cat. Incidentally, he was just as hard to tear from his victim.

He led a joyful life for his first dozen years. His widowed father and his grandmother, the Doña Mercedes, literally worshiped the ground the fiery little beggar walked on.

Not a Mexican vaquero or a rangy American cow-puncher could beat him—or perhaps not equal him—when it came to judging or handling a piece of horseflesh. As to the riata, even Gabriel, the kindly old man who had worked for his grandfather, insisted that in all his span of years he had never seen his superior; and when it came to exercising a weighty .45, all agreed that by the time hair began to grow on his upper lip he would stand alone in the field of gun work.

For all the worship given him, for all the respect and, sometimes, sheer flattery, you could not even hint that Shane was in any manner spoiled. He rode hard, he played hard, he fought hard—but he did it all fairly. There was always a pleasant smile on his lips, always a merry twinkle in his eyes, always a laughing word for every one.

He had plain and good common sense, too, and he knew the business of cattle. It was his hope—as he told his father and grandmother in his more serious moments—to help his sire make O'Hara Ranch the biggest in the great West.

But apparently fate had decreed that there was other work in store for Shane O'Hara—for a time anyway. Never in his life, either, did he forget the occasion when this was brought home to him.

His father had ridden over to Las Palomas, some thirty miles across the

plains, and had said that he would return for supper. Doña Mercedes and Shane, however, had waited an hour for him, and then eaten. It was long after dark when he finally came, and, after the first look of worry had left her face, his mother shook a half rebuking, half playful finger at him.

"Ah, my Terence," she said, "you have been in mischief again, I see! No—do not deny it. That little lurking devil that laughs behind your eyes tells me that the O'Hara and the Valencia blood have been asserting their temper."

Shane always remembered the way his father had thrown back his head and laughed heartily, and leaped forward and hugged his mother.

"Partly right, you wise *madre,*" he grinned, "but nothing serious. Just a pair of unscrupulous sharpers. I caught them fleecing a poor beggar of a tenderfoot out of all his money 'cause he'd looked too long at the wine when it was red. Didn't even have to draw—merely gave them a good pummeling with my fists! Surely *you* wouldn't have me stand by and see filthy work of that sort done?"

Doña Mercedes sighed. She ran her slim, tapering fingers through his auburn hair and spoke softly.

"I suppose not, my Terence, but you will be a little more careful, please? That O'Hara and Valencia blood!"

Her son reassured her, and then turned to Shane.

While he ate he followed his usual custom. He spoke of the ranch, of the shipments, of money matters, as if he were conversing with an equal in years and experience. This was the time, perhaps, that the boy loved him best. With his grandmother in the big armchair, dexterously manipulating her intricate lace-making, he and his father would sit there chinning for hours, and never a moment of time was dull.

On this particular evening, too, it was especially exciting. Shane had persuaded his father to recount the oft-told tales of Dennis, his grandfather, having to do with the mad and glad and bad days of Forty-nine. He was at the most interesting point of them all when a knock came at the door.

"Come along in, anybody," called out Terence O'Hara cordially.

The invitation was heeded, and they came—yes, they came. Confused and kaleidoscopic jumble that it was, Shane had it indelibly imprinted in his memory.

The door burst open, and action was so quick that minute details were impossible. Two men—two faces, rather—about red-belching guns, appeared in the aperture. The boy remembered one because of the ghoulish eyes above the broad and flattened nose, the other because of the livid purple scar that ran from the right temple to the eyebrow. He remembered, too, the words of the former:

"Jump in on *our* game, eh? You ain't jumpin' in on any others, you damned Irishman!"

The weapons below the drink-distorted faces began to bark. Shane saw his father's hand flash to his hip, but, as the iron came from the holster, he simultaneously saw him pitch forward. He saw his grandmother spring to her feet, with white and determined face and burning eyes as she lurched out for the form of her fallen son.

He then flung himself at his sire's weapon, lying on the floor; and the next thing he knew, something hot seared across his left temple at the instant that his fingers closed over the butt of the revolver. There came, then, voices and much noise—and for a minute everything went black.

When matters had become slightly normal, several hours later, he found himself face to face with the truth. His father was dead, shot down by two crooked gamblers whose victim he had succeeded in saving. Although chase had been given the fugitives, they had managed to make good their escape. But they left behind them, in Terence O'Hara's bedroom, a thing that might have caused them sleepless nights and restless days, had they known of it.

Doña Mercedes, her slim and patrician face alabaster white, knelt on one side of the bed that held the body of her son; on the other, still somewhat bewildered, Shane was in like position. His grandmother finished her fervent prayers, and spoke in a voice that made the boy's blood run cold: "Shane—Shane O'Hara!"

He raised the head that had been resting on clasped hands, and gazed wide-eyed at Doña Mercedes: "Yes, grandmother?"

"Repeat—repeat after me: I, Shane O'Hara, also having blood of De Acosta y Valencia, solemnly swear, over the dead body of my father, Terence O'Hara, to kill with my own hands, or with weapons wielded by my own hands, the two men who murdered him. I give my word on this; I promise never to rest until it has been accomplished—I, Shane O'Hara, and a Valencia as well. And may *Dios* watch over me. Amen!"

Slowly, word for word, the boy echoed her words. His voice was hoarse, strained, and he still gazed at her somewhat dazedly. As he finished, however, he must have somehow caught the spirit of the soul that shone in that death-white face and those onyx-black eyes.

Suddenly his arms went forth, got beneath the sheet, and wound about the riddled chest of his father. He gave way to passionate sobbing then, and surely one cannot blame him.

It was over presently, and he raised his face. It was red-eyed, tear-streaked; but there was a fanatical light, a light almost of insanity, in the eyes that so resembled those of the woman across the bed:

"Kill them—*kill them?*" he breathed in a tense whisper. "I'll—*I'll rip them apart!*"

Such was the heritage of Shane O'Hara!

CHAPTER II.

O'HARA BLOOD.

LIKE grim statues, on a towering bluff, stood a pinto horse and a man. The animal was conceded to have the swiftest legs in Arizona; his master, in every mining camp and cow town he had visited, was credited, when it came to gun work, to have the swiftest hands. A fine pair, a dangerous pair, were Shane O'Hara and his mount.

It was nine years since Terence O'Hara had been buried, and three since Shane had bowed his head over the grave of the Doña Mercedes. Up to the death of the latter the boy had been constantly warned and reminded as to the heritage left him. Not a day passed—not a meal—that his grandmother did not tell him of the task he was in duty bound to perform. And, when he started out, after her death, the instincts of the killer were strong within him.

As he stood now, with brooding, narrowed eyes that were gazing steadily out at the miles of limitless prairies below him, there was something in his figure, in his very bearing, that caused one to think of an avenging hand.

He was a trifle under six feet, but with a leanness to his body, a suppleness, a muscularity that told an observer that it would be difficult to find a more catlike, quick-working frame. He had the flaming red hair of his father, and the same laughing lips—lips that had now grown drawn and bitter.

His eyes were from the Valencia side; eyes, formerly merry, that seemed to have in them the experience, the weariness, the determination, the hate, of years. His hands were slim, nervous, continually playing about the butts of his weapons. It was this, perhaps more than all else, that made him look like a man on a death quest.

For the last three years he had wandered, he and the pinto. Into every camp and town, over every prairie and valley and mountain, he had ridden. He had gone quietly, searching, always searching. He had chosen the worst places, where bad men—gamblers, gun fighters—were reputed to make their headquarters.

Not once, however, had he caught a glimpse of that flattened nose or that purple scar on the right temple. This is not to say, though, that Shane had never had trouble. Particularly, at first, the sheer youthful appearance of him caused the usual scornful remarks from riffraff or bad men in their cups.

It is significant, withal, that it was never repeated—by the same people. That lightninglike draw, that weirdly uncanny marksmanship, that almost hellish rage, commanded respect. Indeed, you had but to mention the name of Shane O'Hara, in certain sections, and so-called reckless gun wielders would look uncomfortable.

But this, as Shane knew, had brought him nothing—except possibly a respect that allowed him to keep out of useless battles. This he did. There was one thing for him in life, one goal, and that was the annihilation of the murderers of his father.

Over across the prairie to the west, at the foothills of a towering range, a new mining camp had leaped magically into being. To it, report had it, every gold hunter and gambler and good-for-nothing was flocking. And Shane, on learning of this, had likewise set out in that direction. It would be in such a place that he would be most likely to find his men.

He straightened now, just as he was about to lift himself into the saddle. His eyes, abnormally clear of vision, had descried two dust spots on the plains, coming toward him.

With the habit of the hunter, he waited, for it was also his one rule never to allow a stranger to pass him without looking at his face. There was always a chance, at least, that it might be one of the pair.

"If it only were! Eh, Streak?"

Tensely, longingly, the words were whispered as his fingers ran through the mane of his mount, and the horse, who knew and loved him well, turned his head and nuzzled him affectionately against the shoulder.

Shane presently bent his head farther forward. There was something wrong with those two dust clouds—dust clouds that were now perfectly plain to him. It might have been a mere casual race for the fun of it, but the watcher felt somehow that the riding of the foremost figure looked too much like an attempt to escape the one in the rear.

This opinion, shortly, was further strengthened. The hat fell off, and in the wind long brown hair, with a hint of copper in it, trailed out behind. He saw her then use her quirt for the first time; but although her animal bravely responded, he was palpably no match for the one in pursuit. Steadily, surely, the latter was gaining.

The O'Hara sense of fairness, of protection for the weaker, was in Shane—the same instinct that had actually caused the death of his father. In a flash he was in the saddle, urging Streak to make for the trail, some half mile farther along, that would lead him to the prairie beneath. With good luck, he had figured, he would come out ahead of the flying pair. Even if he did not, he was confident that his mount could soon catch up with them.

For that scant half mile the pinto certainly showed the stuff of which he was made. He negotiated the distance in a manner that proved he was entitled to his name. Arriving at the tricky, winding path, he also gave evidence of the fact that he was worthy of being dubbed sure-footed. He took the tortuous descent at a brisk canter, and brought his master and friend to the level of the plain while the racing pair were still a quarter of a mile away.

During the descent Shane had not been able to see them. Now that he did, his face flamed. The man had come up to the girl, and with his right arm he was endeavoring to circle her waist in a way that suggested an attempt to drag her from her saddle. She was, however, fighting gamely; but the avenger wondered why she did not use, or attempt to use, the rifle that hung at her saddle. Possibly, he decided, it was not loaded.

The man was so intent on his attack on the girl, and the girl was so busy repulsing it, that neither noticed the approach of the newcomer until he was a mere hundred feet off and his voice had snapped out like a shot: "Stop that, you snake!"

The girl gave a cry—a glad little cry of relief. The man, his face lustful, turned with a snarl at the intruder.

"Keep out of this, you fool!" he yelled.

"I don't happen to be *searching* for trouble," replied Shane O'Hara, "but I'd advise you—"

He got no further. The man's hand, as he muttered a curse, went toward his right hip. Nevertheless, it never reached there; and what is more, it stopped of its own accord. Ruffian though he was, he knew the plains and he knew how to judge men who handled weapons.

Forever after, he swore vehemently that he did not so much as see the slightest movement of Shane's arm; and yet, he add-

ed, it must have moved. To verify this, he points out that what he *did* see was an extended hand with a .45 in the fingers, and a pair of burning eyes that literally chilled him to the marrow.

"I don't know who you are," the auburn-haired stranger was saying, "and I don't know who the girl is—and it doesn't matter. I don't allow any woman to be roughly handled when I'm around!"

"Well," grumbled the man, "it ain't any o' *your* business. I know her, I do, an' you don't. Can't you 'tend your own affairs?"

"It depends," said Shane, "upon what she has to say?"

Squarely, questioningly, he was looking at her—and, as he looked, he told himself that the winsomeness of her face, the appeal in her great gray eyes, was a thing beautiful to behold. Red came to her cheeks, under his gaze, and she spoke with a catch in her breath:

"Yes," she said, "I know him. But—but he's been trying to thrust his attentions on me, and I—"

"Care to have him move on?"

"Yes, I—but please don't have any trouble!"

"Move, stranger!"

The quiet words cut like a knife, and the other, although he did not have the temerity to reach for his gun, at least showed his anger.

"Aw, it ain't *your* business," he blustered, "you—"

He forgot himself, sufficiently, to use a name that no man is supposed to take, and a name that, of a certainty, never could be taken by an O'Hara or a Valencia.

Shane's eyes narrowed, darkened, glittered, and what his grandmother would have called "the fighting devil" lurked in their depths. Slowly, he rode his pinto forward, his weapon leveled.

"Keep them up," he warned.

The man knew, now, that he had overstepped, and the pallor of his face, the cringing of his body, showed it. Shane rode beside him, deftly yanked the revolver from the holster, and flung it on the ground. With that, he replaced his own firearm and spoke curtly:

"Get down!"

Fear came to the eyes of the woman bullier, and he started in to protest that he had not meant anything anyway. Again, however, came Shane's words:

"Get down!"

He obeyed this time, tremblingly. And the girl, then, saw action and anger that made her gasp.

O'Hara, with a bound, was on the earth. As his feet landed, so did his fist—landed on the jaw of his opponent. Shane's face was now a thing that would have frightened any woman, and a goodly number of men. It was as pale as the fleecy clouds in the sky, and the burning eyes were as black and glittering as onyx. Hate had distorted his features—a hate and a rage that grew fiercer as he sent in each blow.

The other, a bigger man, a far heavier one, was literally helpless before him. His face was cut, his eyes were closed, and how he managed even to stagger about on his feet was a marvel to the girl.

"Please," she cried, finding her voice at last. "Please stop. You'll kill him!"

Still Shane O'Hara continued his demoniacal assault, and the girl, then, got to the ground and flung herself at his back.

"*For my sake,*" she shrieked at him—"please!"

Halfway to its destination, he stopped a blow. He blinked, rubbed a hand dazedly across his eyes, and stood silent as the other man at last toppled over inertly.

"You haven't *killed* him, have you?" she asked.

For a moment, Shane did not answer. Hate was still on his face, and his eyes seemed to be looking away—a million miles away. Suddenly, however, he got hold of himself and mastered the O'Hara and Valencia blood.

Coolly, he looked at the man at his feet, and then into the gray eyes of the girl.

"No," he said, simply, "I haven't! I should have, though!"

"It's not that I'm a coward, or squeamish," replied the girl. "I—I don't like man killing man, though. I've seen—seen too much. That's why I didn't even use my rifle when I might have! Thank you for helping!"

Shane's face was very serious now, and she wondered at the trouble in his eyes.

"My name's O'Hara—Shane O'Hara," he said, frankly holding out his hand.

"Mine," she said, unhesitatingly taking his fingers, "is Laurel Keene!"

He bowed, stooped, and picked up the other's weapon. Ejecting the cartridges, he nudged the man and told him to get up. When he had done so, with assistance, he forced him to discard the belt containing the bullets. Then he handed him his weapon.

"Climb onto your animal and ride," he ordered.

Laurel Keene thanked him—and Laurel Keene, being a woman, did so with a glad little thumping of her heart. She may have been afraid of killing, but where is one of her sex who does not like to have a man, and particularly one who is not bad-looking, physically champion her?

"May I ride home with you?" Shane asked, as the other disappeared at break-neck speed. "Perhaps it would be better!"

"I don't want to take you out of your way," she told him, even though her eyes didn't agree with her words.

"I'm riding over to Pay Dirt City as they say some one has pretentiously and optimistically called it!"

"And I hope truthfully called it. My father has been working there, but he's away on a prospecting trip now to another new find farther off in the mountains. We live just this side of it. Pay Dirt City, I mean!"

They rode along, chatting. Shane, for awhile forgot his mission in life. Like all the O'Haras, he had never cared for women; but, like them again, when he *did* meet one that he liked, he knew it at once—and was not backward in saying so.

There was something in this girl's eyes that drew him; a certain whimsical appeal that caused him to want to take her in his arms and protect her. That was it—protect.

Something told him that she needed help, and in his blood from both sides there was chivalry.

In his tempestuous way—the same way in which Dennis O'Hara had won the proud Mercedes—he leaned over in his saddle and put out his hand. Instantly, however, he drew it back. An infinitesimal sigh escaped him, and his eyes flashed.

He had no right to think of such things while his father's death was unavenged. The scene over the body, across from his grandmother, came back to him, and he blushed in shame at having, even for a moment, forgotten his vow. He turned his talk to other things. He talked airily, with the smooth tongue possessed by all of his name, and the girl was laughing.

But here, too, it was awkward. Her laughter, and the fact that it was he who had elicited it, made him sure that he might care; made him sure, anyway, that he wanted to take her in his arms. He brooded, then, morosely.

Presently they came to the shack where she dwelt—a crude affair that had been thrown up in a hurry.

"Won't you come in?" she invited. "I can at least offer you tea!"

Shane fought off the temptation. It was nearing dusk, and he knew that the dance halls and bars of Pay Dirt City would soon be filling. Stern duty called, and he heeded it.

"I've business to attend to," he said, "and I've got to get on! But," he added, "may I drop in—some time?"

She looked at him and there was a flush on her cheeks.

"You surely may," she said, "on one condition. Please don't look for trouble with George Berry, for that's his name. I don't like killing, and when men use guns it so often means that!"

"I promise I won't," he told her, gravely, and rode away.

CHAPTER III.

HALF DONE.

ON his entrance into Pay Dirt City, the battered Mr. Berry must have caused comment; it must have been followed, as well, by a large amount of questioning; and, in turn, he must have told some sort of story, undoubtedly dwelling on the uncanny ability of his enemy to get

a gun from a holster without any movement noticeable to the naked eye.

To substantiate this, let it be mentioned that Shane O'Hara's entrance into the camp had the earmarks of having been awaited. Men lounged, with suspicious nonchalance, in doorways; they remained suspiciously silent as he passed, and they likewise gazed with suspicious interest at his back when he had gone by. It was the calm that presaged a storm.

It is barely necessary to remark that he knew this. Although he rode silently, erectly, his eyes before him as he walked the pinto, he nevertheless took in every face that showed. It was a trick contracted during the years of his quest, this business of being able apparently to be looking at nothing and yet see everything.

He picked out the roughest hang-out on the long street, choosing it by the type of men he saw entering and leaving. Gold Diggers' Hope proclaimed the large strip of canvas over the door, in vermilion letters more than a yard high. To it he rode, dismounted, and led Streak to the hitching post. Then he made his way inside.

There was a crowd of men at the bar, but he found a place at one end that gave him a full view, and ordered something soft. Beyond, he saw the other rooms—a large dance floor that was separated, by an excuse for a partition, from the room filled with roulette and faro and poker tables. Business, as yet, could not be termed in its glory, and he decided to wait for perhaps an hour before going on to make the rounds.

The storm he knew was brewing—the storm he did not want to break—presently manifested itself.

A man far at the other end of the bar, with a red-rimmed eye and an ugly mouth, soon discovered his presence. He was somewhere in his forties, and it was his lying boast that he had killed a man for every year he had lived. On top of this, he insisted that no one was his equal at the draw, and he had also expressed a desire, when hearing Berry's story, to see the red-topped youngster in action.

"Don't you-all tell me *you're* the maverick what Berry done so eulogizin'ly mentioned about?"

At the words, Shane O'Hara flushed, and the fighting devil came to his eyes. He stilled it though, and answered, very quietly:

"I'm not answering because I'm not looking for trouble," he said, simply, meeting the other's gaze squarely.

The so-labeled bad man now made his mistake. The room had grown still, and he knew that it was his play. Vanity—and a certain amount of confidence—got the better of him.

He turned to his companion, and a coarse laugh came from his lips. He was, at least, sincere, and his laugh was really natural.

"I *tol'* you, John—an' I likewise tol' you that I sure does look on this job o' trainin' youngsters as tedious!"

"I'm asking you not to provoke me," said Shane, with a slight sigh, as he idly lit a cigarette he had rolled. "I honestly don't want trouble with a man who doesn't mean anything to me!"

"Kid," replied the other, his face darkening, "I want to learn regardin' that there draw I hear of!"

Shane's left hand was holding his cigarette to his mouth, and his right was toying with his glass, drawing a pattern with the bottom of it on the bar. His black eyes were icy now, and the grim lines in his face told that he was holding his temper.

He spoke quietly, almost wearily, and his words held a sigh:

"I wish you wouldn't! I don't care—"

"*You* don't care," interrupted the other, while the audience was breathless. "Why, kid, *I* desire to see that there quick draw they recite about!"

"Do you?"

The words were said quietly, and while they were being spoken, every man there later attested that Shane's right hand was casually fingering his glass. They go on record, too, regarding another matter. They insist that they saw no more of a movement than had George Berry. What they did see, they tell me, was a hand, still partly around a glass, holding a .45.

"This is it," was the next thing heard.

The ugly-eyed boaster nearly had his orbs jump from their sockets. His sudden paleness, his sagging shoulders, his utterly

incredulous expression, were really ludicrous. With it all, he was game, and he had learned his lesson and was glad of it.

His look of unbelief gave way to one of awe, to one of respect. He steadied himself, removed his hat, and placed it before him.

"Stranger," he said, "I admits, before this here assemblage, that I been in error! I reckoned, an' so advertised myself, as bein' the quickest man I ever met up with on the draw. I ain't—an' that's final— Young stranger, will you shake with an ornery disillusioned human bein'?"

Shane O'Hara smiled—a tired smile. He replaced his weapon, and nodded absently.

"Certainly," he said, and swept the room with his eyes as the other man started to walk forward.

Suddenly, however, he changed. The beaten boaster had not taken a half dozen steps before the hinges on the door creaked. Shane, seemingly with his eyes ahead, managed somehow to catch a glimpse of the latest customer. When he did so, his face went so white, his eyes turned so black, that every man in the room tried to step away from the newcomer.

"What's the idea o' me bein' a leper?" the newcomer wanted to know, the nostrils of his flattened nose distending in what must have been joy at the prospect of excitement.

"You're not a leper—you're a corpse!"

Stingingly, bitingly, filled with inexpressible hate and loathing, the words came from the lips of the red-headed stripling.

The newcomer's eyes widened, surprise and disbelief on his face. Bad Al was his cognomen, and it is an indisputable fact that he had done much to deserve the wicked-sounding sobriquet. He was extremely free at the draw, and most men knew this and therefore avoided all things that might lead to it. Almost sorrowfully, and with an open wink at the crowd, he studied the stranger.

"Young 'un," he said, with a guffaw, "I'm deducin' you been tamperin' with this here red liquor o' Stubbs. We-all know what authority she carries, too, for which, seein' as maybe you don't savvy, I'm illustratin'. Usta be a lil mouse aroun' here, ahangin' out twixt bottles an' glasses; usta be a big he tomcat, too, that was allus tryin' to bag Mr. Mouse; this here mouse, though, was so quick an' small he could get away easy and hide where he couldn't be ketched. One day, howsoever, he slips as he's retreatin'; an', as he slips, he goes spang into a puddle where some o' this here whisky has been spilled.

"An' what does he do then? Does he pass out or continue retreatin'? He does *not*. He turns aroun', he does, an' he rears right up on his hin' legs, an' he bellers out, he does: 'Say,' he wants to know, 'where's that cat?' Yessir, *that's* the authority this here red liquor has!"

Bad Al, his ugly eyes leering joyously at the prospect of playing with a victim, gave another wink to the crowd. It was one of his favorite stories, when baiting, and usually drew a laugh from his audience.

Now, however, not a titter came, not a word; instead, men seemed to be endeavoring to get out of his path. His confidence, however, was too great to allow him to see any handwriting on the wall, and he turned with a drawl to the stripling:

"O' course," he said, "you know what happened to Mr. Mouse? He was *ate!*"

Shane O'Hara's eyes were narrowed and flecked with fire. Avidly, longingly, he was feasting them on one of the men for whom he had looked for three years, one of the men who had shot down his father without warning, one of the men whose death was his life work.

"Draw," he purred, venomously, through white lips, "draw, you dog, even though you didn't give Terence O'Hara a chance to!"

Consternation, then dawning, came over Bad Al's face. As it did, he wasted no time. His right hand went to his hip.

"Gawd," he breathed, "it's the brat that—"

He did not finish. Every eye in the room was on the young stranger, and yet, as had been the case with Berry, they all later vowed that they could not remember the movement of his arms.

They saw his gun spurt, and they saw Bad Al drop his weapon with a hoarse cry.

He was, nevertheless, game. He was a two-gun man, proficient with either hand, and his left flashed down. He was quick, too—marvelously quick.

Even so, at the instant his second iron left the holster another bullet splintered his hand. He crumpled, then, pitifully and sickeningly. With his hands hanging and dripping blood, his face green-hued, he begged for his life:

"You shot my father down without warning, didn't you—you and your partner? You never gave him a chance. You crept up like ghouls in the night and murdered him. For three years I've been searching you, and for nine I've been thinking of you day in and day out. I gave you a chance, you snake—the chance you didn't give my father. Die—you rat!"

The light of the killer was in Shane's eyes, the venom of the killer in his words, and the power of the killer in his hands. His gun spoke, then, and Bad Al dropped with a bullet through his heart.

But the O'Hara and Valencia blood was still raging. His face insane, his teeth set and bared, Shane stepped closer to the murderer's dead body. He emptied his gun into it, and after that, he drew his other one and riddled the carcass.

Then, replacing the weapons, he went very white, stepped back to his position at the bar, and stood there with unseeing eyes that were looking miles and miles away.

Men were surrounding him. They were clapping him on the back; they were telling him that he had rid the community of a sneaking desperado; they were assuring him that the sheriff would give him a vote of thanks; and, lastly, they were begging the privilege of shaking his hand.

But Shane O'Hara heard them not. His face was drawn, tired, and his eyes looked as old as the earth itself.

"Half done," he murmured, as if he had been utterly alone—"half done, father! And—I'll get the other, Grandmother Mercedes!"

He was himself a moment later, poised, alert, gimlet-eyed—and he immediately attended to business. With the gold in his well-filled belt, he hired a hard rider to travel to O'Hara Ranch. There were dozens and dozens of followers there—men and women and children who reverenced his name—who day after day were anxiously awaiting news.

To his manager, he wrote a brief line:

DEAR REX:
Tell them I've killed one. SHANE.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DISCOVERY.

SHANE O'HARA that night stayed alone in the flimsy room with the canvas walls which he had rented over Gold Diggers' Hope. He was in one of his black moods, and he did not want company.

He hoped, he prayed, that he might discover the other murderer in the vicinity. The strain of the three-year quest, of his constant vigilance and searching, was beginning to tell. He felt all on edge, raw-nerved and ready to crack if he had to wait much longer before finishing his task.

It is possible—although he tried to put the thought away—that Laurel Keene was partly responsible. Like all the O'Haras, like all the Valencia's, he made up his mind on the spur of the moment.

From the first glance at her, from the first meeting of those wide and appealing gray eyes, he had known that she was the one girl he had ever wanted. He had dreamed, longingly, of taking her back with him as his bride, the mistress of the wide acres of O'Hara Ranch, just as his Grandfather Dennis, perhaps, had dreamed of taking Mercedes—and brought it to pass.

He loved the ranch, did Shane. It was still his wish, after his quest was over, to go back and make it the biggest one in the State—in the whole country, even—as he and his father had always planned.

He missed the cattle, the round-ups, the companionship of his followers. And again, as he dreamed of the day when he might return, he prayed that it might be his luck to find the partner of Bad Al here in Pay Dirt City. God! To get it over with!

Irresistibly, the next morning, he found himself drawn toward the far fringes of the town—toward the Keene shack. He tried

to fool himself—to tell himself that he was going in that direction in order, by chance, to pick up some information regarding Bad Al's partner—but he was certainly guiding the pinto in a straight and unerring line.

Approaching the cabin that snuggled up against the hills, he cast off all indecision. A word to Streak and the animal broke into a canter, making straight for the dwelling.

"Are you in, Laurel Keene?" sang out Shane, simply.

She appeared in the doorway almost immediately, but her face sent a shock through Shane. White and clear-skinned though she was, she now looked unnaturally pale, and there was a wan expression about her lips. Her eyes, always big and wide, seemed larger than ever, and dark-ringed beneath.

He caught his breath with a little gasp, and getting from the pinto, stepped hastily toward her.

"You're ill?" he asked.

"No," she smiled—but it was a smile of pain—"I happened to hear, last night, of the killing!"

Shane, instinctively stiffened. His eyes took on that grim and far-seeing gaze, and his lips tautened.

"It was necessary," was his answer.

"Killing is *never* necessary," she cried, color coming to her cheeks. "Oh, how I hate it, how I dread it, how I'm haunted by it! I saw a man killed, once—uselessly killed. I saw my—my father do it! I can never forget the awfulness of it. I can never forget the man's body, and the fiendish look on the face of my father! I hate it; I dread it; I fear it!"

She closed her eyes tightly, and shook her head, and a convulsive shudder went through her body.

Shane, thoroughly understanding, gently put a hand on her shoulder as if he were soothing a sobbing child.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm awfully sorry!"

Silently, she motioned him inside, and, when he had seated himself in the worn rocker she pointed out, she spoke again.

"Please don't blame me for feeling so badly. As I told you, I hate this gun fighting. You see, with my father always prospecting, we've traveled about in many rough camps, and I've seen lots of things I wish I never had seen. Then, a couple of years ago, there was that man my father shot. It—it unnerved me, and the criminal uselessness of it has left an impression I can't lose!"

"I see," murmured Shane, in a whisper, all the time wanting to comfort her.

"I appreciated greatly what you did yesterday," she continued. "Men in mining camps don't seem to care much. It was chivalry, something I knew existed, but had never known, and it really gave me happiness. When I saw that look on your face, as you fought Mr. Berry, it frightened me. You, too, I thought, might be a killer—and then, last evening, I learned that you were! It sort of destroyed the last ounce of faith!"

Shane O'Hara leaned forward in his chair. For three long years he had unswervingly held to his quest—but now something snapped inside him. He had the hot blood, it must be remembered, of the O'Haras and the Valencias, and he had always been known, back at home, for speaking out his mind.

"Laurel Keene," he said. "Laurel—I can't help it, my dear. It's only yesterday I met you—just one day—but it might as well be a year, or a hundred years, or a million of them. I know my own mind, as do all the O'Haras, at the first flash—and we make no mistakes. Never have I looked at a girl or a woman a second time, until I saw the gray eyes of you—the gray eyes that called to me, that gripped me body and soul, that said they were in need of me. Laurel, I want to give you the protection you should have; I want to give you all the love of me. Will you take it—will you take me, my dear?"

She was astonished, as one might expect, but the confusion in her face did not hide all else. It did not hide the winsomeness of her eyes, or the trembling opening of her lips, or the wonderful flood of crimson that had come to her cheeks.

"I—it's so soon, Shane O'Hara," she managed to say. "I don't really know you, and you don't know me, and—"

"Know *you*—know *me*," he laughed, his eyes young and sparkling with the happiness that had come to him. "Why, of

course we know. It isn't time that matters, it's just the knowing all of a sudden—and we do! As for myself, as for what I am, I've not done a wrong or an unclean or an unfair thing. I've a big ranch—O'Hara Ranch, it's called—down in the southern part of the State. It's prosperous enough, I can say, and I want you there to rule over it; to ride over the thousands of acres beside me, to help me run it and make it the biggest in the world even—and to be the mother of another O'Hara that may continue with the work! Tell me yes, Laurel!"

His face was wistful, pleading, and a smile was on his usually stern lips as he stretched forth a hand.

"I—I don't know," she said, giving him hers. "It seems so sudden, so terribly soon, but, although I suppose it sounds unwomanly, I admit that I might be able to—to care! If only," she added, heatedly —"if only you weren't a killer!"

Shane O'Hara, at the words, dropped her hand. His face whitened, crimsoned, and whitened again. The tired look came to his eyes, and they grew old.

His breathing was hard, and his voice hoarse—for he had forgotten, for a brief moment or two, that he had no right to speak as he had as long as the other murderer lived.

"Don't be too harsh, Laurel," he told her, "about my being a killer, as you call it. Sometimes, you know, it can't be helped —sometimes it's necessary—sometimes it's a duty. In my case, for instance—"

"But it can *never* be a duty," she cut in. "It can always be avoided, and it always *should* be avoided."

"No, Laurel, you're wrong. I don't speak of it—I never have—but I do owe it to you. To explain very briefly, my father was shot down without warning, without even a chance to draw, by two cowardly murderers. I promised my grandmother, my father's mother, to avenge his death. I swore it by everything I held sacred. The thing is half done, for Bad Al, the man I killed last night, was one of them. I killed him, though, fairly, for I didn't draw, I didn't start to fire, until he'd had a chance to. Oh, no, Laurel, this is one case where even you, with your hatred of gun work, will agree I'm right and in all ways justified."

"I won't," she said firmly. "Think, Shane—you've already killed one of them, haven't you? Isn't that enough? Why, it's *too* much. It isn't man's place to kill, no matter what another has done. I've seen so much, and it's so useless, and—"

"But outside of everything," he put in, "I've given my word—given it to the body of my dead father and my dead grandmother. It's got to be done, that's all."

"Please, Shane!"

He eyed her searchingly, hungrily, but his lips were firmly taut as he shook his head.

"No, Laurel; it's got to be. I wanted to tell you, to be fair, that I had no right to speak, that I won't have until my father is avenged. After that, dear, try to forget it, and we'll go to O'Hara Ranch and put it all away from us. But it's got to be done, Laurel—it's got to be done before I can even breathe freely."

With brimming eyes she gazed at him. A pitiful little smile came to her lips. She shook her head slowly, firmly.

"Shane, I can never see it in your light, I can never—"

"But you must, my dear," he cried, his arm going out and his hands resting on her shoulders.

Her foot, somehow, struck the leg of the flimsy table, and it crashed to the floor. As Shane stooped to right it and pick up several books and papers that had likewise fallen, a cry escaped him and he jerked up erectly:

"What is it?" she asked.

His face was deathly, his eyes like onyx, as he looked at a picture upturned on the floor—a picture of a man with a livid scar running from his right temple to his eyebrow.

"Who's that?" he asked, his voice a mere tense whisper.

For some reason she did not realize the significance of his attitude and voice. She smiled.

"That?" she said. "Oh, that's a picture of my father, taken some ten or more years ago."

White, burning-eyed, Shane O'Hara stood there, literally struck dumb. His face was a study—a study of joy and relief at first, and then of a hopeless and great sorrow.

Suddenly he shut his eyes very tight, opened them, and took her hand. He wrung it, jerkily and intensely, time and time again.

Then, like a flash, he was out of the door and had leaped to the back of his pinto.

"Good-by," he called. "Good-by, Laurel!"

CHAPTER V.

THE KILLER.

SHANE rode, not in the direction of Pay-Dirt City, but out toward the plains that stretched undulating away for countless miles. He wanted to be alone; he wanted to keep out of sight of another human being; he wanted to think and face his great sorrow.

He urged the pinto—urged him with a reckless and bitter laugh as he wildly threw back his head.

"Eat up that ground, Streak!" he cried. "Just eat it!"

His brain whirled as he flew over the prairie—whirled madly. He, an O'Hara, had found the one woman in the world he could ever love—and he, an O'Hara, had given his word to kill, and wanted to kill, the murderer of his father—a man who turned out to be hers. It seemed like a grim and ghastly trick of fate.

There was already blood between Laurel and himself, and after he had done his duty there would be still more. It made their marriage impossible, not to be thought of; it made it so that he could never even speak to her again.

Still he urged the pinto on, and still the fleet animal responded. How he expected to solve his problem, why he was riding, he could not tell. It was just to pass the time—to pass the time until his brain somewhat cleared.

His quest was over, and he saw, in his mind, the eyes of Terence O'Hara and the Doña Mercedes looking down at him; and, as they looked, they smiled that quiet, secure smile that said they had always known he would succeed. Still he rode, and a cry came from his lips.

"God!" he said passionately. "Why did she have to be mixed up in it?"

The whirling quit his head at last, and he was the calm-faced, burning-eyed taut-lipped avenger. He turned the pinto, and sent him off on a slow, steady lope for the gold camp.

At his approach to the outskirts men greeted him with grave respect: at his entrance to the long and single street he noticed that they whispered ominously after he had passed. In Gold Digger's Hope, from mine host Stubb, he found out what it meant.

"O'Hara," warned the proprietor, "I likes yore straight talk an' yore dazzlin' draw, wherefore I'm hintin' to you. Nick Keene may happen along to-night!"

"Nick Keene?" remarked Shane mechanically.

"I forgit, stranger, thet you don't know. He was a pard o' Bad Al, though jest what kind o' pard we can't say. We-all been suspectin' 'em both of maybe puliin' some shady stuff; oh, they was a curious holdup, awhile back, an' a murder. Anyway, I'm jest tellin' you. He's dangerous, is Nick. He ain't only dangerous because he draws terrible quick an' places lead terrible straight; he's dangerous because he allus tries to come up from behind, when a man ain't lookin or expectin', an' fillin' him full o' bullets without any risk to hisself. Be ready, O'Hara!"

"I think I know something about him," said Shane.

"An' glad I am you do, an' glad we all are, for he's comin', sure. This here George Berry, which same you rightly pummeled, was seen streakin' it out to the hills where Nick is lookin' for dirt. I reckon I don't have to tell you what that means, do I?"

"I think I can imagine," was Shane's retort as he nodded his thanks and went out into the street.

He wished it was over; wished that the thing for which he had longed for nine long years was done with. He was just as strong in his resolve, just as strong in his instinct

to kill, but yet, somehow, the sheer joy of it was gone.

"Say, Shane," came a voice, "let me tell you!"

He halted. It was impossible to get away and be alone with his thoughts. A man had stepped from a doorway, with the best intentions in the world.

"It's Keene—Nick Keene," went on the other excitedly. "He's a bad un, you know, an' he was Al's pard. He's quick on the draw, an' he's death when he tickles that trigger; an' this here no-account George Berry was seen lashin' a cayuse for the hills where Nick happens to be so-called prospectin'. Thought you ought to know, for he's—"

"Thanks," the avenger cut in, and somewhat brusquely left the man who was trying good-naturedly to help him. "I've heard!"

He passed on, a target for all eyes. He traveled idly, in a sort of daze, and praying that the moment would come. He wanted it over with—he wanted it over with so that he might mount the pinto and turn his head toward O'Hara Ranch.

As he passed a tent bearing a crudely lettered sign proclaiming that the occupant took in washing, there came another interruption. It was a woman this time—a truly huge creature with a red perspiring face and a pair of kindly blue eyes that were trickling tears at the corners. She arrived with a rush and flung her fat and bare arms strenuously about his neck.

"Misther O'Hara, darlin'," she blabbed, "ain't ye bin told that Nick Keene may be comin' at any minit? Ah, lad, I heerd what ye done, yesternight—I heerd ye laid low an' sint to the divil, whose friend he was, that spalpeen of a Bad Al. I loved ye fer it, Shane O'Hara, an' I'm havin' mass sed fer ye this comin' Sunday, fer 'twas a work of the Lord. But don't ye know Nick Keene, lad? He don't fight fair. He'll come a-sneakin' up from some place, an' he'll spatter ye before ye so much as are beknownst of the fact that his ugly prisince is prisint. Mind, ye that—"

She broke off with a scream, and the hot beads on her face cooled, and the red skin turned white.

"May the saints save us," she gasped, "an' amen!"

"Break away, Mother Flaherty," came a harsh and cackling voice—"break away before I have to riddle you!"

The old Irishwoman could do more than cross herself hastily and mumble to her deity. It was Shane who, although his back was toward the man and he could not see him, pushed her aside and, raising his arms, faced about.

"Keep 'em up, Kid the Killer! Ha, ha! Keep 'em up!"

The last of the O'Haras looked at his enemy. It was the same grim and cruel face, confronting him, that he had seen that night when his father had been shot down. The livid, purplish scar was there, from temple to eyebrow, and Shane felt his brain aflame as he saw it.

Immediately, however, he cooled. His face took on that white look, his eyes became onyx, his lips were so tautly drawn that they were fading into nothing.

All thought of Laurel, all thought of his dreams, was gone. He was the killer now, the avenger. Yet his nerves were under perfect control, and his brain was functioning.

The other, he knew, had been drinking to some extent. Outside of that, he was aware that Nick Keene, from all reports, was a quick-firing customer and one possessed of an almost never-failing aim.

Shane longed to have his fingers about his throat, and literally to rip out the life of the creature who had taken that of his father. He knew, however, that one downward move of his arm, no matter how quick he was, would mean instant death. Swiftly he thought—thought and groped for some plan, some ruse, some hope.

"So you sent Al over the divide, did you?" Nick was saying, murder in his eyes and in his voice and in his heart. "Well, youngster, I'm just tellin' you these things so's you'll know. I don't never let a pard of mine be done in, an' Al was mine. I killed your interferin' father, all right—an' I'm killin' his son likewise!"

The string of words that followed were foul and unprintable. White-faced, rigid, Shane listened to them.

His brain was working quickly, and so were his eyes. Doorways and tent-flaps were crammed, but all were observing the one immutable rule of the plains and the mining camps and the cow towns—and that is, never to interfere, no matter who is right or wrong, in a combat wherein weapons such as shooting irons have a part.

It was all in the mere fraction of a second, you might say, and Shane knew that the index finger on either of those triggers was at any time liable to put on pressure. Suddenly he made his decision—suddenly he took his chance—and suddenly acted upon it.

"No, Jim," he cried—"*don't shoot!*"

For that merest infinitesimal atom of time Nick Keene was fooled. He started to spin about; but, before he did so, he realized his mistake. He was, however, too late to regain his triumphant mastery of the situation. Withal, he had the sense, when he whirled back to his position, to fire.

But he was not alone in this. Shane O'Hara, as his cry had left his lips, had made that movement that all swore could not be discerned. Simultaneously with the crackling of Nick's revolvers, his own spurted forth—but it did so only once. At the same instant both men pitched forward.

There was, nevertheless, a difference—a decided difference. Nick Keene had a bullet through his heart, whereas Shane O'Hara had one through his thigh.

"I've done it, father," he said, as faintness gripped him. "I've done it, Grandmother Mercedes!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOMEWARD TRAIL.

FOR four days Shane O'Hara was laid up in his room at Gold Diggers' Hope. The wound, a young camp medico found, was not a serious one, but it was the kind that was fairly unpleasant and hampered progress.

As soon as he could stand the slightest weight upon it, the avenger called for his pinto. The physician raved, Stubb violently protested, and the numerous men that were proud to call him friend endeavored to dissuade him. But he only shook his head, with that taut-lipped expression and those tired eyes.

"No, boys—I appreciate your thoughtfulness—and many thanks—but I've got to be hitting the homeward trail!"

DEAR REX:
I got the other one. Back in about a week.
SHANE.

He had hired another hard rider, after the killing of Keene, and sent him on with the above note. He would have to start to-day, in order to be there at the time stated, and an O'Hara did not go back on his word.

He waited, however, until long toward sunset, so that he might get the benefit of the cooler night air traveling, and the moon, too, was a full one. And at last, as the sun was sinking toward the horizon, he rode away from Gold Diggers' Hope on an easy lope, with cheer after cheer and the cries for the best luck in the world ringing in his ears from the friendly crowd.

Out on the plains, and headed for home, the smile he had worn in public left him, and his head dropped low.

"I somehow wish, Streak," he confided to his faithful animal, "that his bullet, at the same time, had got me where mine got him!"

The instinct of the killer, at last, had left him; the hot blood of the O'Haras and the Valencias had strangely cooled. As long as he lived, he told himself, he never wanted to shoot another man; that he would, if he could in any honorable way do so, even avoid actual clash.

From his boyhood—for over nine long years—he had talked of nothing, thought of nothing, but the running down of the men who had turned out to be Bad Al and Nick Keene. For more than three years he had hunted them relentlessly, tirelessly, fiercely. He had hated them with an insane hatred, he had longed and prayed for the day when he might find them. And now it was over.

He was still glad that he had accomplished what he had. The memory of his

father was avenged, the soul of Doña Mercedes could finally rest in peace, and he himself had the pride of knowing that he had done his duty as an O'Hara.

But after that, what was left? The ranch? Yes, he had the ranch, it is true—but he could not have the one thing on it that he wanted above all else in the world. He was like all of his blood, and was aware of it. They could love but once, the men of his family, and that was all.

Never would there be other eyes to tempt him, never would there be other eyes that would make him forget for a moment the great wide gray ones of Laurel.

For an hour—for two hours—he rode along. Over and over, over and over, the thought ran through his brain. Why was it that it had to be so—why was it that the one girl he cared for was the daughter of the man who had killed his father, and likewise the daughter of the father *he* had killed?

He repeated the thing, without reason, blindly, gropingly, as if he might have expected some answer from the powers above. His brain was reeling, his heart was hammering, and his face held a ghastly despair. He stopped his horse, dropped his reins, and stretched out his arms to the sky:

"Why?" he asked wildly. "Why?"

Behind him, over a mile away, and as if in answer to his question, he heard the faint thunder of the hoofs of a swiftly galloping cayuse. He turned slowly, a frown coming between his eyes, a sigh to his lips, as he immediately became icy, on guard, waiting.

He wondered—and hoped that he was wrong—if it might be some crony of Bad Al and Nick Keene, come to try to avenge the death of his mates?

The hoofbeats became louder—ever louder—and Shane leaned far over the neck of the pinto, his eyes narrowed and shaded by his hand. The moonlight was strong and white, and presently, with his sharp eyes, he detected an approaching horse, coming like mad.

He would wait, he decided, until he could see the rider in the saddle; and then, if he were unknown to him, he would merely warn him that if he came for vengeance he would be killed, but that if he retreated nothing would be done to him.

Then suddenly a cry came from his lips as he straightened up. It was not a man; it was a girl, and the girl was Laurel.

He wondered what it could mean? And although he loved her more than life, he wished she had not come. It would only give him further—memories. For there was blood between them—and blood that could never be eradicated as long as the world lasted.

"Shane," came her voice. "Is it you, Shane?"

"It is, Laurel," he answered, steadying his nerves.

"I've ridden hard," she said. "I went to the hotel, and they told me you'd gone, and I followed—I followed because I want to know if you still want me, if you still mean what you said that day."

"Laura Keene," he told her grimly, stoically, "I am the man who just killed your father, as you know!"

"*Not* Laurel *Keene*," she cried, still gasping for breath after her hard traveling, "and *not* the man who killed my *father!*"

"*Laurel!*"

"Shane," she explained, "I've just found out, to-night, after supper. I thought I might as well go through whatever papers father—the man I believed my father, I should say—might have. I knew he had some in a worn old leather portfolio which he always kept securely locked. I opened it and learned everything.

"He married my mother, I found, when I was about three years old. From some of her letters, and from other sources, I found that she died about a year later—and died, God help her, from the cruelties and beatings and privations he caused her to bear. You see, I myself—"

"But you're sure, Laurel?" asked Shane O'Hara, still scarcely able to believe the truth of the wonderfulness of it all.

"Quite sure, and I have the evidence with me. Shane, I suppose I am unwomanly, as I said before, but I couldn't help coming after you. I knew, anyway, that what you had said, you meant. You see, I have never had much out of life, although it isn't right to slander the dead. I think

I can tell you, however, that he—he made it very hard.

"I stayed only because of what I thought to be my duty toward my dead mother; and I realize more, since thinking it all over, that you, too, had your duty; that you, according to the standards of men here in the West, according to the blood in your veins, *had* to do what you did! But—but I still hate killing, Shane."

"My dear," he said, his face very tender, "there is to be no more of it. When I killed Nick Keene—and realized, as it seemed then, that the killing of him had cost me you—I made up my mind never to kill again. Something snapped in me, and the instinct of the fighter to the death left me. No, Laurel, there will be no more."

"Thank God, Shane," she said.

Shane O'Hara put out his arms, and rested his hands on her shoulders. The worn and aged look was gone from his eyes, and instead they danced merrily; the tautness had left his lips, instead they curved mischievously.

"Laurel," he said, with the ring of happy youth in his voice, "do you know that my ancestors must be looking down in horror and disgust?"

"Why?" she gasped, her face puzzled.

"Why?" he laughed. "It's a devil of an O'Hara I am—I haven't kissed you yet, my dear!"

"Anyway, Shane," she told him, when they were riding the homeward trail, under the moonlight, some minutes later, "you surely made up for lost time!"

THE END

HOOKY!

HOW c'n a fellow *help* it? Say,
A boy *can't* go to school a day
Like this—he wouldn't be a boy;
He'd be a teacher's pride an' joy!

Wastin' a day like apple pie
Learnin' you where is Boston, why
It is; that sort of stuff—
An' they won't let you holler "'Nough!"

They keep on crammin' you, an' you
Keep peepin' out at a sky blue
As—as—well, blue *enough;*
An' then some robin does his stuff;

Flirts his tail, an' hollers, "Go!"
You bet I went! I had to show
That robin I don't take a dare—
An' I was goin' to have my share

Of sun, an' wind, an'—maybe—showers.
I wonder if I picked some flowers
F'r teacher, would it be all right—
But flowers won't fix pop to-night!

Th' water was just fine! I bet
It's supper time. Is my hair wet?
Oh, well. *Let* 'em do their worst;
I don't care—if they feed me first!

R. E. Alexander.

A Small Town Guy

By C. C. WADDELL

Author of "A Boob There Was," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

RUSH HOLLISTER hears a pistol shot in the adjoining cheap apartment. Investigation proves the person who fired the shot to be a pretty woman who had defended herself against the attack of a young man who, wounded, has left the building to notify the police. The young woman, terrified, tries to leap from the window to the street, but Hollister overpowers her and saves her from self-destruction. He realizes that while her act has been justified she is in a serious position, as the wounded man has strong political influence. He hears the girl's story, how she had been induced to come to New York to marry a man whom she later discovers to be married, and Hollister decides to help her. He is on the eve of returning to a small up-State town to assist in his father's factory. With the aid of his friend, Eustace Blake, he gets the girl into a drawing-room on a train and back to his home town. Eustace bobs the girl's hair and disguises her as well as possible, and it is planned to have her hide out by working in the factory owned by Hollister's father. She is to make application, and Rush Hollister will employ her. The girl secures a boarding house, buys a newspaper and finds her own picture staring from the front page as being a woman wanted for attempted murder.

CHAPTER V (*Continued*).

THIS IS THE LIFE!

IT seemed to her that people were eying her strangely, suspiciously. How could they fail to recognize her?

Almost on a run she reached the boarding house, and rushed upstairs to her room. She did not go down to lunch; she was afraid to face the gaze of the boarders. And when the landlady knocked at her door she said she had a headache and didn't care to eat.

Neither could she summon the courage to go down to dinner, but satisfied her hunger with a box of crackers and some fruit that she stole out during the afternoon to get at a near-by store.

Later, however, feeling that she would go

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 10.

mad if she stayed any longer alone, she crept down to the sitting room. The landlady was the only person there, and she was reading the local paper.

"Well, I see that Rush Hollister is back," she observed. "Prob'ly that means a wedding before long."

"Is—is he engaged?" quavered Beatrice.

"Well, just about the same as. Him and that Jennifer Doane, the old man's ward, was brung up together, and was always awful fond of each other. They say, too, that old Hollister is dead set on bringing about the match, and he generally gets what he goes after. Then, of course, it would be a fine thing for Rush in a financial way. She's fairly rolling in money, and—"

She broke off to peer across at Beatrice through her steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Land sakes, child!" she exclaimed. "How pale you are. And you look all peaked and drawn. Hope you ain't sickening down for a fever, or nothing like that?"

"Oh, no," Beatrice insisted. "I will be all right as soon as this headache wears off."

The landlady went back to her paper.

"I see they ain't caught that woman yet that shot that poor young feller in New York," she said. "The Darrel Detective Agency has offered a thousand dollars' reward to any one that gets her. Wish I could lay my hands on the blackmailing hussy. I'd turn her over mighty quick."

Beatrice, murmuring hastily that she would have to lie down, went back to her room, but although she crawled into bed it was not to sleep.

She must go away from Glendale, she told herself. And yet, without friends, without a position, and with that menace of arrest and prison hanging over her, where else could she go? Fate seemed to have forced her life into a narrow iron groove, from which there was no escape. She must stay here; she must go to work at the factory; she must carry out the program that had been arranged for her.

And what of Rush Hollister? Needless to deny to herself that he was in love with her. A woman knows that instinctively. Every glance of his eye, every tone in his voice had betrayed his sentiment toward her. Yes; might as well face the truth. He was in love with her, and she was in love with him. But it would be suicidal for him to marry her.

This other woman, this Jennifer Doane, could bring him everything—wealth, and social prestige, and his father's approval. She, Beatrice, could bring him only a tarnished name.

For long hours she lay awake, fighting out the battle with herself. Then she decided.

Since there was no other course open to her, she would stay in Glendale; she would take the position in his factory; she would meet and talk to him, so far as business demanded. But there she would draw the line; there must be nothing more.

For his sake, she would steel her heart against his advances. He had been a friend to her in her dire extremity; and now she would be a friend—a true friend—to him. She would let the other woman have him, because she herself could bring him only disgrace.

She was going to play fair.

CHAPTER VI.

BRAN BISCUITS.

AT nine fifteen the next morning Rush sat at his desk, ostensibly checking up a set of invoice sheets, but in reality watching the gate through which applicants for a position approached the factory.

At last he saw what he was looking for—a slender girl with bobbed hair advancing shyly up the path—and he jumped to his feet to get over to the employment department ahead of her.

But unfortunately his father chose just that moment to ask a question concerning some of the changes which Rush had recommended.

"Hold on a minute, son," he said, and while Rush chafed at the delay he rambled off into a long-winded analysis of conditions that sounded like one of those interminable hypothetical questions they ask in a murder trial.

"Yes, yes; I get you." Rush cut him short at about the halfway point in his exordium. "And I think you're perfectly right about it, dad. I agree with you absolutely."

"But I thought you said yesterday—" began the old man bewilderedly.

"I've changed my mind," Rush snapped, and dived for the door.

When he catapulted into the employment office about ten seconds later he saw Beatrice turning away with a crushed, uncomprehending look, while the martinet at the desk reeled off his meaningless formula:

"Sorry; but I don't believe we have anything for you at present. If you care to leave your name and address we will communicate with you in case anything turns up."

"Wait!" Rush's voice rang out like a trumpet blast. He almost shook his fist at the employment officer.

"Mr. Blake, the new head of our advertising department, has just told me that he will need an assistant," he said. "Possibly the young lady can make arrangements with him."

He turned to the girl.

"Would you care to do cataloguing work, miss—"

"Baker," she said, but did not look at him. "My name is Helen Baker. Yes; I think I should like that very much."

"Then take this card to Mr. Blake." He scribbled his initials across it, to give an effect of business procedure. "You will find him in room five, right up the corridor."

The employment officer, who was a dyspeptic and kept a bag of bran biscuits in his desk, looked huffed at being overstepped in his functions.

"Hardly the type that Hollister's is accustomed to take on," he sniffed as Beatrice passed out. "I make it a point myself never to employ a woman with bobbed hair for an office position. I consider them flighty."

"Maybe," said Rush pointedly, "that is just the trouble with Hollister's. We're shy on modern ideas all along the line."

He went back to the office, raging.

"Dad," he banged down at his desk, "there's just one more change I want to suggest for the betterment of the plant, and that is a new employment officer."

The old man stroked his chin uncertainly.

"What's the matter with Bancroft?" he demurred. "He's been with us a long time—almost twenty years, I guess—and I never heard any complaints against him before."

"He isn't human," stormed Rush, "that's what's the matter with him. And he's hopelessly out of date. Why, the dried-up old coot sat there, nibbling at one of his infernal bran biscuits, and told me he wouldn't employ a woman with bobbed hair."

"Well," Mr. Hollister confessed, "I don't know but that I feel the same way myself. I tried every way I could to keep Jennifer from doing it, but, of course, I might as well have talked to the winds. Here in the factory, however, it seems to me—"

"But that's such an old-fashioned view to take," expostulated Rush, who up until yesterday had, himself, regarded the short-haired mode with disapproval. "You might as well say that you wouldn't hire a man who didn't wear side-whiskers. What's the length of her hair got to do with a woman's ability or character?

"Anyhow," he argued, "a man who lets himself be ruled by his personal prejudices has got no business in the position Bancroft holds. If you think he's entitled to something for the twenty years he's been with us, I'm perfectly willing that you should pension him, or shift him to some other department. But I don't want him where he is. That's flat, dad." His jaw set obstinately.

The father had clashed with that stubborn will before, and decided that, since Rush seemed so keen on the point, it might be advisable to let him have his own way.

"There may be something in what you say." He laid aside his cigar. "No doubt that Bancroft is a good deal of a grouch. But the trouble is, what to do with him. How about putting him in the advertising department under your friend, Blake? I heard him telling you he would need an assistant."

This was hoisting Rush by his own

petard, as the country newspapers used to say.

"No!" he burst out, explosively. "I wouldn't wish an old dub like that on my worst enemy, let alone a pal. Besides, that place with Uke is already filled.

"I'll tell you!" His glance fell on the invoice sheets lying on his desk. "Why not bring him in here to help me out? He could relieve me of a lot of detail work like this, and so allow me to look after the employment part myself. We can salve him down by giving the job a flossy title like Chief Statistician, or something of the sort, and let him have the same salary he is drawing now."

And the old gentleman having ultimately agreed to this solution, Rush went out to inform the victim of his new honors.

On his way back, he dropped in to see how matters were progressing with the advertising department.

Eustace, an enormous green shade over his eyes, hailed him with a chuckle.

"Beatrice has just been telling me that some unpleasant personage out there came within an ace of turning our ingenious, little scheme into a washout," he said. "Only your arrival at the last minute, shouting: 'Reprieve!' saved her."

"Yes," growled Rush, "and I've just finished putting the skids under that old bran-eating buzzard for doing it. It seems he doesn't care for bobbed hair."

Then he told them how the near-catastrophe had come about, apologizing eagerly to Beatrice for his delay in reaching the employment office.

"But it takes more than a dyspeptic snapping turtle like Bancroft to beat the John J. Prodigal Son Association." He beamed effusively on his fellow-conspirators. "We're all set now, I guess, and sitting pretty; what?"

He was leaning over Beatrice's desk as he spoke; and Eustace, whom love had made sympathetic, discreetly framed an excuse to leave the room.

"I hope you will like it here." Rush bent a little closer.

She moved slightly away from him. Her eyes were bent upon the work Eustace had laid out for her.

"Oh, I am sure I shall. I've had some instruction in drawing, and as Mr. Blake outlined the work to me, it looks as if it would be very interesting. I am more than grateful to you both for the chance."

She spoke naturally enough, but somehow Rush missed from her tone that note of intimacy and comradeship that had been in it during their adventures in New York.

It must be the newness of the situation, Rush decided. Perhaps it would be better to give her a chance to get settled. She'd be all right again as soon as the strangeness wore off, and she found she was really among friends.

But as he turned to start away, she halted him as if recalling something, and reached for her bag.

"Before you go," she said a shade less stiffly, "there is something I must speak to you about. After I left you yesterday, I found the hundred-dollar bill you had put into my pocketbook. It was generous of you—knightly is the only word I can think of." Her voice trembled slightly. "Please don't think I am unappreciative. But, of course, now that I am self-supporting, you must take it back."

"Not me!" Rush backed away, putting his hands behind him. "Don't be silly. Starting in as you are, you will need a little extra money in your purse. And that is a slice of fatted calf you are fully entitled to. Have you forgotten the motto of our John J. Prodigal Son Association? 'One for all, and all for one!'"

"But I can't take money from you!" she protested, trying to force the bill on him. "You were so good and kind through all our New York experiences. Please, please, don't make it hard for me now."

Before Rush could answer, he was interrupted by a dry, deprecatory cough from the doorway, and wheeling about, found Bancroft, the former employment officer, now chief statistician, standing there.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hollister," he said in his thin, querulous voice. "I have been looking for you everywhere. Numbers forty-seven, forty-eight and forty-nine of these invoice sheets are missing, and I don't seem able to locate them in the files. Some one appears to have been grossly careless."

"Oh—er—" Rush stammered, confusedly. "Why, I guess I must have stuck them in my pocket when I left the office. Yes; here they are." He fished out the crumpled sheets and handed them over.

"Confound that pest!" he muttered, as Bancroft withdrew, his mouth set in prim disapproval. "I ought to have canned him and been done with it, I suppose. Still, as dad says, the old fossil's been with us a long time, and I've got him now where I don't see how he can do any damage."

What he failed to realize was that Bancroft was nursing a rankling sense of injury. Not at all deceived as to the character of the "promotion" he had received, the veteran had been quick to trace a connection between it and Rush's interference on behalf of the bobbed-haired girl he would have turned away.

Why should young Hollister have been so ready to go over his head and champion the cause of an utter stranger? There must have been some previous acquaintance between them.

Now, his suspicions fully confirmed by what he had overheard, his dull eyes were lit by a gleam of satisfaction as he returned to his desk.

"An adventuress, that's what she is!" he mumbled, munching at a bran biscuit. "Some one he's got hooked up with in the wild life of New York, and who's followed him up here. Chances are she's got something on him, and he's trying to buy her off. But she's too cute for that. She's playing for bigger stakes."

The temptation was strong upon him to even things up for the loss of his comfortable sinecure by tattling what he had heard to the old man. But on reflection he decided to keep silent for the present. Rush was now in high favor with his father; and if he and the girl chose to deny the story, Bancroft had only his own word to offer as proof of his statements. Then the old man, believing his son unjustly maligned, might forget those years of faithful service.

A better plan was to give the culprits rope and let them hang themselves. Sooner or later that short-haired hussy would show her hand. And he could imagine how the senior Hollister—set, as common report had it, on the marriage of his son to Jennifer Doane—would storm when he learned of the disgraceful intrigue carried on right under his nose.

But just at present, if Bancroft had only known it, the intrigue didn't seem to be progressing any too well. Against his will, Rush had been persuaded by her almost tearful insistence to take back his hundred dollar bill; but he couldn't flatter himself that he gained much by the concession.

He lingered on at Beatrice's desk, seeking vainly to restore things to the old congenial footing.

"It's only because she's new and uncertain here," he told himself again. "I've got to give her time to get acclimated."

Yet the weeks drifted on, and still Beatrice persisted in her refractory mood. With Eustace she was on the same easy, companionable terms as always, but let Rush show up, and she was instantly under restraint, on guard.

She did not rebuff him openly or give him cause to voice a protest. Nothing so crude as that. She was friendly, smiling, interested in all he had to say, yet in a thousand subtle ways she held him at arm's length. She never permitted him to see her anywhere except at the office, and there she never allowed him to veer from the level of ordinary business relations.

Rush, like a dog held back by a leash, grew irritable and petulant under this treatment, and took it out to some extent on those about him. Bancroft, especially, had a far from easy time.

But the chief statistician raised no complaint. He merely chalked up another tally on the score he intended to settle, and kept on secretly gathering information, while he bided his time.

CHAPTER VII.

SOME NEW "STATISTICS."

AFTER a month or so, Beatrice lost the hunted feeling that had driven her, quaking and trembling, from the streets to the refuge of her boarding house that first day in Glendale, like a rabbit chased to its burrow.

Her name had long since disappeared from the newspapers, and although she was still listed as "Wanted" on the records of the police, active efforts to locate her had died down. Spitz Darrel, recovered and out of the hospital, was once more lounging about the Broadway resorts.

She was still a bit diffident about meeting people, it is true, and led a life almost as quiet and secluded as a nun's—a rather dull life, one would think, for a young and pretty girl who had been the belle of a gay, small town set.

Yet Beatrice, in a way, was not unhappy. She liked the feeling of independence that came from being on her own, and liked, too, her work at the office. Eustace vowed, indeed, that he could not have found so capable an assistant if he had searched the length and breadth of the land; and between them the new catalogue, now rapidly approaching completion, bade fair to be a thing of real beauty as well as a commercial success.

And then, as spring came on, the lonely girl was drawn from her retirement through the friendship that had grown up between her and Jennifer Doane. It would have been only natural that there should have been a feeling of antagonism; but instead, the two, from their meetings at the factory, were strongly drawn toward each other and this mutual attraction quickly developed into a warm attachment.

Before long Jennifer was calling at the plant every afternoon to drive Beatrice uptown in her car, and insisted on acting as a sponsor for her in the social life of the place. The drab, monotonous days were over now for "Miss Baker." She was besieged with invitations, drawn into a round of gayeties. The *Cinderella* who had crept unknown into Glendale, a fugitive from justice, was now, as by the wand of another fairy godmother, turned into a radiant princess, dancing at any number of balls with a score of admiring princes.

Jennifer also arranged that instead of staying on at the dreary boarding house, Beatrice secured accommodations with a charming private family where the surroundings were far more congenial and of the sort in which she had been brought up.

In fact, if it had not been for the enforced separation from her own people and the perturbing question of Rush Hollister, Beatrice would have regarded her present lot as almost ideal. It hurt her to see that puzzled, questioning look on Rush's face as she continued steadily to withstand his every attempt to bring back the rapprochement which had existed between them in those harried hours of their flight from New York. But she did not dare let herself relax for a second. For his sake, she did not dare let herself relax; and even more so, now, for Jennifer's. She must play fair.

So she danced and flirted mildly with other men, and tried to ease the pain at her heart by plunging more and more ardently into the diversions which Jennifer was always ready to suggest, oblivious to the fact that for every *Cinderella* the clock must eventually strike twelve and her shimmering robes revert to sordid rags.

The faint whirring of that clock preparing to strike could already have been heard if Beatrice had only bent an ear.

One June afternoon Jennifer came down to the factory to take her for a motor ride out to a lake resort of the neighborhood, and Rush had stepped out to the car to see them off. Old man Hollister sat watching them from one window of the office with a benevolent smile on his face; from another window peeped the small, pinched face of the chief statistician.

Taking a bran biscuit from his desk, he chewed on a fragment of it as if to give him courage. Then he cleared his throat.

"Of course it's none of my business, sir," he ventured; "but do you think it's altogether wise for Miss Doane to be seen so much with that Miss Baker?"

"Wise?" The old man wheeled sharply about. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing, sir. Nothing at all. Only I've heard people wondering about it. No one seems to know anything about this Miss Baker—who she is, or where she comes from, or anything—and from all accounts she's pretty close-mouthed in regard to herself. I should hate to have Miss Jennifer get in with anybody that wasn't—well, with anybody that might cause her to be talked about."

"Nonsense, Bancroft!" The old man snorted indignantly. "Miss Baker shows on her face what she is—a lovely well-bred girl. If the Glendale gossips can't find anything to say against her except that she don't go tooting her pedigree, I guess she must be just about flawless."

With that the conversation dropped; but Bancroft felt with sly satisfaction that his innuendo had not fallen entirely on stony ground.

The old man was absorbed and irritable all the rest of the afternoon, pushing things about on his desk, smoking more cigars than were good for him, and scowling from time to time without any apparent provocation. Jennifer was the apple of his eye, and anything that touched her even slightly was to him a matter of deep concern.

He thought of speaking to her, and cautioning her to go slow in her intimacy with this Miss Baker, but there was really nothing he could say. The girl was absolutely circumspect in her behavior, beyond reproach in every way. Because she was reticent as to her previous history did not necessarily imply there was anything to conceal. Many people are temperamentally averse to talking overmuch about themselves, or what they consider purely personal affairs.

Besides, Jennifer, as he knew, was high-spirited, ardently loyal to those she liked. If he attempted to interfere with this friendship of hers, even by a word of warning, he would only provoke a quarrel, and, the chances were, induce her to champion the stranger more zealously than ever.

He was still worrying over the matter when he was called to New York on a business trip, but by the time of his return, it had been temporarily swept from his mind by the press of more important matters. He arrived home toward the end of the week in a high good humor, so bubbling over with elation at the results of his journey that he could not wait to go to the house before telling his news, but drove direct from the train to his office.

"Well, Rush," he beamed, setting down his bag, "I guess you won't think your old father is such a back number, after you hear what I've done. I put over a deal down at New York that 'll make you just about jump up on your desk and crow.

"You know," he explained expansively, "how you've been kicking about the way Means & Russell handle our business in the metropolitan district; and, although I didn't talk so much about it, I haven't been satisfied with them myself by a long shot. They're too slow and old-fashioned for this concern, as it's going at present.

"So, without saying anything to you about it," he chuckled, "I decided while I was down there this time to look around and see if I couldn't make connections with some more progressive jobbers. And, as luck would have it, I ran into a live wire—a go-getter chap that you'll take to, just like ham to eggs. He knows the trade from A to Z, not only in New York, but all over the country. He's been on the road for Dimmock's for the last six years, and before that was with King-Bodie Company; and both of them triple star him. Epstein, the sales manager at Dimmock's, tells me that no matter what territory they threw him into, he'd show anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five per cent increase in orders."

"But we don't need another traveling man now," Rush objected. "The boys we've got are doing all right, and—"

"Can't you wait until I'm through?" broke in Hollister testily. "Of course we don't need a traveling man; and I don't believe we could get this fellow if we did. He's too high-priced for us. What he offers is an entirely different proposition. He wants to take over our entire output, along with those of three or four other concerns in associate lines, and act as exclusive sales agent for the bunch of us. We become merely manufacturers, you see, paid on a cost plus basis, while he assumes all risks of selling and collection, relieving us of all the expense and bother connected with that end of the business."

Rush began to look serious.

"H-m!" He frowned reflectively. "That's a pretty revolutionary move for Hollister's, governor. I'd want to be mighty sure of the people I was hooking up with before I went into a contract of that sort. I suppose you had this wonder man thoroughly looked up, didn't you?"

"I wasn't born yesterday," snapped the old man. "Haven't I already told you what Dimmock's and King-Bodie think of him? And in addition, I got a financial statement from him, guaranteed by his bank. He's no millionaire, doesn't claim to be; but, as he says, he's got assets enough, backed by the reputation of our goods, and his own selling punch, to make the thing a go.

"I don't know what's got into you, Rush," he grumbled, all his good humor gone. "Here's an arrangement I thought you'd be for, like society for the Prince of Wales; and all you can do is to hum and haw over it like an old woman."

Rush laughed.

"Funny to hear you rowing me for caution," he said, "and me calling you for being too impetuous. Still it does seem to me in this case, dad, as if somebody was trying to put over a good deal of a gamble on the strength of Hollister's reputation. Who is this fair-haired lad who's going to do so much for us?"

"John G. Phaldon is his name," answered the old man, a trifle sulkily. "But before you're with him ten minutes you're unconsciously calling him 'Jack.' That's the kind of a fellow he is."

"Jack Phaldon!" repeated Rush, staring.

"Yes. Why do you look so startled? Do you know him?"

"No-o." The younger man had himself under control by this time. "The name sounded familiar to me; that was all. Possibly I've heard one of our own traveling men speak of him."

"Well, you'll have the chance next week. I've invited him to come up and make us a visit, so that we can go over the proposition in detail, and if mutually agreeable, sign up the contract. He promised me he'd be here on Tuesday."

"On Tuesday? Here?" Rush started to his feet. "Er—excuse me, dad. I've just remembered something I've got to see about in the advertising department. I'll be with you again in five minutes." And he dashed off down the corridor.

"For Heaven's sake!" growled the old man. "You'd think the place was afire. I can't imagine what's so devilishly important in the advertising department to take him off like that. And I'm certainly not going to sit here cooling my heels while he goes chasing all over the plant." He picked up his bag, and started out the door. "Tell him when he comes back, Bancroft, that I've gone up to the house."

But the manufacturer was hardly outside the office before Bancroft, cramming into his mouth the half of a bran biscuit on which he was regaling himself, was up from behind his desk and scurrying down the corridor on the chance of gathering an earful through the keyhole.

Just before he reached room five, however, the door opened, and he dodged swiftly out of sight into a convenient broom closet.

A second later, Rush and Beatrice came out into the hall.

"I couldn't speak to you inside there," Rush explained. "I didn't know when I left the office that 'Uke' had all those engravers in there, but this is something that won't permit delay. When and where can I have a talk with you privately?"

She hesitated, drawing back from him a little.

"Why, I don't know," she started to reply evasively. "Is it necessary to—"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid!" There was a tinge of bitterness to his tone. "I'm not attempting to force my society on you. I know better than that. But, listen! Something has come up that makes a consultation between us imperative. I can't go into it now. Dad is waiting for me in the office. But I must see you without delay. May I call at your boarding place this evening?"

She thought a moment, then shook her head.

"No, we might be overheard. It's something about the New York affair, isn't it?" she asked, paling a little.

Then, as he nodded assent to her question, she decided.

"I'll tell you. I'll be walking by those vacant lots on Cherry Street at eight o'clock this evening. Come by in your car, and I'll get in. That will be safest."

She went back then to her work, and Rush passed on hurriedly to the office.

The unseen listener to their conversation came out of his retreat in the broom closet, and stood thoughtfully brushing some shreds of lint from his sleeve.

He hadn't learned all he wanted to; not by a good deal. But he had gathered something. There was undoubtedly a secret between these two—a secret that was to be discussed that night on a clandestine drive, and that was connected in some way with this man, Jack Phaldon, that the boss had met in New York.

Bancroft rubbed his lean hands together, and, going back to his desk, treated himself to two bran biscuits. At any rate he was getting warmer.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WAY OF A MAN.

DRIVING through Cherry Street—the Cherry Streets, if you will notice, are almost always little frequented streets toward the outer edge of town—Rush saw a lithe, graceful figure waiting for him in the soft, summer dusk, and drawing in to the curb halted while she stepped inside the car; then with a quick shifting of gears was on his way again.

The maneuver, with its appearance of furtiveness, could hardly have failed to suggest to any one watching the idea of a secret assignation; but Beatrice, glancing quickly around, was persuaded, to her relief, that they had escaped observation.

The only thing in sight was a battered, loaded-down flivver of the tin-can variety, displaying a Michigan license plate, and driven by a rough-looking, swarthy man who was manifestly a stranger to the locality.

There was also, it is true, a modest coupé tooling along a block or so to the rear; but that was too far off, she felt sure, for its occupants to identify either her or the Hollister roadster.

Down the street Rush drove rapidly; then, diverging, struck a State road which crossed the river on an iron bridge, and then led off into the wooded hills to the west.

The flivver and coupé, trailing behind him, followed the same route.

Beyond a murmured greeting as she got into the car neither Rush nor Beatrice spoke until they were over the bridge; then, slowing down a bit, he turned to her.

"You'll have to take a vacation or something next week," he said a shade brusquely. "At any rate, you'll have to lie mighty low, and it would be better if you got out of town. Jack Phaldon is coming here."

"Jack Phaldon!" Her hands involuntarily gripped together. "He has located me, then?"

"No. It's simply another unlucky break like your encounter with him in the lobby of the hotel when we were trying to fool the police. My father happened to meet him while he was down to the city this week, and has invited him to come up here and discuss a business proposition.

"And that's the difficult part of it," he added glumly. "If this deal goes through—and the old gentleman seems hell-bent for it—Phaldon will be dropping in on us at the factory at 'most any old time. You can hardly escape running into him."

She gave a dismayed shake of the head as she took in the import of this, and then her shoulders drooped.

"And so I am to be driven out by him again?" she muttered dispiritedly. "Just when I was beginning to feel at ease here, and was commencing to lift up my head once more. It doesn't seem fair."

Rush longed to take her in his arms and comfort her. She seemed so slight, so frail, so alone and unprotected.

"It isn't fair," he growled wrathfully. "And it isn't going to happen, if I can help it. But the governor has evidently fallen for Phaldon like a baby for a carving knife, and I don't know whether I'll be able to pry him loose or not. I think myself that the fellow's scheme is pure hokum, but—"

"Oh!" she cried. "So it's a scheme that he's trying to get your father interested in? I wonder—" She broke off. "Do you mind telling me what this scheme is?"

"Why, no." He outlined the proposition for her as his father had presented it to him. "Not a bad idea, you see, and one that I might be in favor of if another man than Phaldon was behind it. I wouldn't trust a yellow dog like that to play straight

in business or anything else. But the trouble is, I can't tell the governor what I know about him without bringing you into it; while, on the other hand, his own investigation convinces him that the fellow is the real McCoy, and just about the finest thing that ever came down the pike."

"Then he can't have investigated very far," she said, with a slight tilt of her lip; "for it isn't the first time that Jack Phaldon has worked that game. Do you remember my telling you that he was dropped to a great extent by people out home on account of stories that were circulated about him, and that my father finally confirmed them, and ordered me to have nothing more to do with him?"

"Why, yes. But I supposed that was in connection with—er—moral lapses."

"Not a bit of it. Those stories related to very much the same sort of a business deal as he is proposing to your father and the fact he had roped a number of our West Virginia manufacturers in with his glib talk. The scheme blew up, and everybody that was in it lost heavily except Phaldon. Out our way they consider him no better than a common swindler; and he himself admitted to me that he was saved from indictment only by a technicality."

"Gee!" exclaimed Rush excitedly. "Do you suppose I can get the dope on that to give to dad?"

"Certainly you can," she said. "All you need to do is to wire Brent & Bowman of Clarksburg, or C. J. Shanahan of Grafton. They'll be only too glad to furnish you full particulars."

"I'll have it in the hands of the old gentleman before to-morrow evening," crowed Rush; "and if I know him at all it'll be just about as safe for Mr. Phaldon to show up around Glendale after that as for an Orangeman to walk into a meeting of the Clan na Gael. That is, if the wires don't burn up under the message the old boy sends him."

Beatrice, relaxing, leaned back against the cushions with a low sigh of relief.

"Then I won't have to go away even for next week?" she murmured happily. "Oh, I am so glad, so glad. There is such a lot of work at the office that I just didn't see how I could leave; and then, too, I didn't want to miss that dance at the lake on Wednesday night, and the moonlight sail we'd planned, and, oh, a lot of things."

"You really like it here then?" he asked.

"Like it? Do you know, when you intimated to me that I might have to go away altogether it seemed like pushing a shipwrecked sailor out of a lifeboat. Why shouldn't I like it? Everybody here has been simply heavenly to me; Jennifer, and Mrs. Colfax where I live, and Eustace.

"And I can never forget that it is all owing to you!" Unconsciously she let the flood of grateful emotions sweep away the restraint she had imposed upon herself. "Often I wake at night, shuddering at the memory of that awful morning in New York when it seemed as if I had come to the end of everything. And then I think of your goodness and chivalry to a friendless girl, and—"

Her shoulder was resting against his. Alone in the motor car together, with only the summer night around them, there was a sense of nearness between them, a rapport, that had not existed since the day they had spent fleeing the city police.

Rush turned the car from the road and into a wooded glade at one side. It was a favorite resort of so-called "petting parties," but to-night no other cars were parked there.

Before she quite realized what was in his mind he had stopped and, turning, caught her in his arms, to rain kisses down upon her cheek and brow and lips. For a moment she yielded—she even returned his ardent kiss upon her lips. Then with reawakened conscience she struggled to free herself, tried to push him away. But he refused to release her.

"Oh, Rush! Rush!" she pleaded brokenly. "You are spoiling everything."

"I am not!" he declared triumphantly. "I am making everything right. I don't know why you have treated me as you have ever since you have been here. I almost thought you hated me. But I know now that it has only been a pose. You can't deceive me any longer, Beatrice. You love me, and I love you. And you are going to become my wife."

What she might have answered to his eager wooing, with his arms about her and his lips to hers, it is impossible to say. But at that moment they were interrupted by a voice from just outside the car.

"Stick 'em up, people!" it said hoarsely, and the order was enforced by the muzzle of a revolver poked in through the window.

As Beatrice obeyed, she recognized in the shadowy figure at the side of the car the rough, swarthy man who had followed them out of town in the tin-can flivver.

CHAPTER IX.

BANCROFT GETS A CLEW.

"CLIMB outa that!" ordered the highwayman, shifting the muzzle of his gun slightly in the direction of Rush to indicate that he was the one especially addressed. "And keep them mitts up while you're about it—see?"

There was nothing to do but obey. It is not considered good form in stick-up circles to argue such a request and the offender against convention is apt to receive a sharp and merited rebuke.

So, with his hands elevated, Rush stepped out of the car, the other moving back a pace as he did so, but still keeping him closely covered with the gun.

"Now turn around," directed the man; and again Rush complied, supposing the fellow intended to search him for weapons before ordering him to empty his pockets. But, instead, his back was no sooner turned than the robber, with the stolid indifference of a butcher at the stockyards, reversed his revolver and clubbed the heavy butt down with murderous force at Rush's head.

Had it landed fair, he would certainly have been knocked out, perhaps have sustained a fractured skull; but just as the fellow's arm rose Beatrice impulsively shrieked a warning "Look out!" and Rush involuntarily ducked. The blow struck glancingly at the side of his head instead of full on top.

Even so, however, he saw a firmament of whirling stars, and, staggered by the lick, half dropped to his knees. Yet, as he felt himself going, the realization flashed on his stunned wits that, except for him, Beatrice was at the mercy of this brutal yegg. A sort of berserk fury straightened him up; and, dizzy, half blinded though he was from the clout he had received, he whirled and grappled desperately with his assailant, struggling with him for the possession of the gun.

So swift and savage was this counter-attack that the highwayman had no opportunity to reverse his weapon again, but still held it clutched by the barrel, while Rush, grasping him about the arms, was trying to seize and wrest it from him.

Locked in a straining embrace, they wrestled round and round for a minute or so, kicking, kneeing, butting each other, disregarding every pugilistic rule—a battle that might have been put on by two wild cats—then the bandit, setting his teeth into Rush's shoulder, jerked his gun arm free and struck again and again at the head and face of his opponent.

Bleeding, reeling under the punishment, Rush could only hold on groggily and take it. Through a red haze he saw the man's hand lift, with the clubbed revolver in it, to deliver a *coup de grace*.

Then a pistol shot rang out behind them, and with it the gun flew spinning out of the fellow's grip to drop a dozen feet away, while he himself, giving a yelp of pain, pulled loose from Rush's relaxing hold and, grabbing his injured wrist, ran clumsily toward his flivver up the road.

From the door of the car, Beatrice had fired at his arm as it raised to strike; and now, leaping to the ground, she sent a volley of bullets spraying after him that accelerated his progress, but evidently did not hit him.

He gained his battered flivver, the engine of which he had left running, threw it into gear, and clattered off down the hillside at a speed that would have done credit to a high-powered racer.

Beatrice followed the flight of the ruffian a few steps, her automatic pumping steadily until the clip was exhausted, then, stooping, she picked up his revolver where it lay on the ground, and, thrusting both

weapons into the pocket of her coat, came back to the car.

Rush, sagged down on the running board, was dabbing feebly at his bloody face with his handkerchief. He looked up at her approach, and managed to give a wavering grin.

"Lucky for me you had the automatic," he panted. "How come?"

"I put it in my pocket when I left the house," she answered briefly. "Cherry Street is a lonely neighborhood, and I didn't know how long I might have to wait for you. I would have shot before," she explained, "but I was afraid of hitting you. Then I saw his arm go up, and fired at it.

"But you are hurt?" She dropped down beside him, a note of solicitude in her voice.

There was reason for her anxiety. He was a disquieting looking object, all battered and bruised, his hair touseled, his collar jerked away, his coat torn into ribbons. Even in that dim light she could discern the gray pallor of his face between the streaks of blood and sweat; and his breath was coming in labored gasps.

"Oh, I'm all right." He weaved unsteadily. "Just winded, you know, and—and mussed up a bit."

Then he slumped over in a dead faint.

There was a little brook at one side of the glade where they were parked and, running to it, Beatrice tore the hem from her light summer frock, and, soaking it in the water, rushed back to bathe his face.

Jerking the cushions out of the car, she laid him out on them, and worked over him, binding up his cuts, and seeking to restore him to consciousness.

Presently he groaned and came to, but he was still so weak as to be practically helpless. She put the cushions back in the car, and then—how she managed it, she never was able to tell—lifted him inside.

She was coming around to the other side of the roadster to climb up into the driver's seat when another car drew up at the edge of the glade. It was the coupé which had trailed them out of town in the wake of the highwayman's flivver, but which, driven at a more moderate pace than Rush employed, had only now succeeded in catching up.

A man got out and, advancing a few steps, peered uncertainly through the trees. There was a touch of furtiveness in his manner, and Beatrice, in view of their recent experience, was hardly to be blamed for feeling apprehensive.

"What is it, Beatrice?" Hollister asked from inside the car.

His voice was faint and quavering, but in that quiet spot, it carried distinctly. The man from the coupé, hearing it, came on with more assurance.

Beatrice pulled the two guns from her pocket, and fired a quick shot over the head of the intruder.

"Go right away from here!" she warned shrilly. "If you come a step nearer, I'll fill you full of holes!"

The man evidently took her at her word. With a nervous, backward leap, he turned and streaked for his coupé and, gaining it, lost no time in putting himself far, far out of range.

If automobiles have emotions that sedate vehicle of his must certainly have been as surprised at the clip it hit as some steady, old, family Dobbin would be to find himself suddenly pushed to beat a world's record.

A couple of miles had whirled by before the coupé's driver quit stepping on the gas; and then he only eased up because he felt that he must have the solace of a bran biscuit. He bolted it recklessly in his agitation.

"A regular gunwoman, she is!" he gulped tremulously. "I thought I heard shots as I came along the pike. Guess they had a quarrel. Maybe she's wounded him. His voice certainly sounded queer and weaklike. In that case, I suppose I ought to go back there." He paused dubiously.

But his humanitarian scruples were obviously not so strong as to persuade him into risking another encounter with the terrifying young woman and her "gat," for, instead of turning, he jumped the indicator of his speedometer up a further notch or so, and held it there until the need of another bran biscuit induced him to slow down.

Then, while he chewed at his dry provender, a fresh reflection struck him.

"'Beatrice'!" he muttered. "That's

what Hollister called her, not 'Helen' or 'Miss Baker.' Proves up, as I've claimed right along, that she's a bad egg. Why else would she be traveling under a false name? And a woman as handy with firearms as that, chances are, has got a police record. I'll bet if I went down to New York and moused around a bit I could find out all about her. Yes, sir, what with that 'Beatrice' for one clew, and this Jack Phaldon figuring somehow in her past, for another, it oughtn't to be hard."

He grew quite excited over the prospect. But excitement is bad for dyspepsia; and he had already had more than his fill for one evening. As the lights of town showed in the distance, he began to be assailed with inward pangs which not even bran biscuits could assuage, and his interest in the mystery of "Miss Baker" gave way to more personal considerations.

Writhing over the wheel, he found himself unable to go on, and was obliged to draw up at the side of the road until the attack should pass. In his misery he cursed Rush and the sinister Miss Baker as the cause of his agony, and rancorously charged it up as an added debt to the score he already had to settle with them.

If evil wishes were bullets, the roadster in which those two were following not far behind must have been riddled by the fusillade of his maledictions.

But curses, like chickens come home to roost, as the old saying goes, and the only apparent effect of his outburst of spleen was to aggravate his own sufferings. Beatrice and Hollister, with all their disabilities, were really faring better than he was.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE FILES.

BACK at the glade in the woods, with Rush, as it seemed to her, urgently in need of medical attention, possibly dying on her hands, Beatrice had decided she must get him to town as soon as possible, and since he was plainly unable to operate the car, she would have to do that herself.

She had driven before, although she was no expert, but the gear shift of the roadster, she found, was different from any she had ever handled, and there were other details that puzzled her.

Necessity, however, is a wonderful sharpener to the wits; and after three or four false starts she managed to get out of the glade without side-swiping a tree, or other accident, and was headed safely down the road.

Owing to her inexpertness and the further fact that she could use only one hand—for she had to support Hollister with the other—she did not dare attempt the speed her anxiety urged, but jogged along at a cautious twelve to fifteen miles an hour.

Perhaps this was just as well, for it gave Rush time to revive. He was practically comatose when they left the glade, woozy from those blows over the head, spent by the effort he had put forth, but along the road he began to perk up s[illegible]t, and show signs of returning [illegible] he was perfectly content to r[illegible], resting against Beatrice's [illegible] with her arm around him to keep him from wabbling all over the car.

Beatrice was too intent upon her duties as chauffeur, and Rush too bruised and sore to indulge in what is known as lallygagging. Let Romeo himself be hammered around with the butt of a heavy service revolver, and it's dollars to doughnuts his most ardent expression would be a series of "Ouches!"

Nevertheless, although Beatrice gave no outward sign, it was to her an hour of poignant emotion.

Hollister's passionate avowal had not in any way altered her previous decision. The same objections held as always to any thought of a marriage between them. She had yielded to him weakly for a moment to-night, when she returned his kiss, but now she was standing firm once more on her code of fair play. From every consideration of gratitude and square dealing, she must withstand his pleading. Of course, he was in no condition to be crossed or argued with at present; but as soon as he was himself again, she would tell him frankly that his suit was hopeless, she could never, never be his wife. She made up her mind to that.

Yet, in spite of the ache of renunciation at her heart, in spite of her apprehension over his injuries, her absorbed application to her driving and to scanning the road ahead, in spite of the cramped position in which she was compelled to sit, that ride filled her with rapture. He was with her, near her, held in her arms, dependent upon her. He loved her—her, and no one else. To know that seemed to her enough.

A wave of tenderness swept over her. The iron bridge was close before them now, and across it on the other side the lights of town. She would drop one kiss on his dark, wavy hair, just above the bandage about his temples. He would never know; but she could remember it as a good-by between them.

But as she bent her lips toward him, he m[illegible]ead with a slight exclamation. [illegible]uttered. "That's old Ban- cr[illegible]nding there at the side of the road. Looks like a joy ride all right. But what sort of a cutie could that old pest get to go out with him?"

They rattled on across the bridge. Again Beatrice bent her head to give that surreptitious caress. This was her last chance.

Out of luck! A motorcycle cop clattered up alongside the car, and curtly ordered them over to the curb.

"Whatcha driving without lights for?" he demanded.

"I—I forgot to turn them on," stammered Beatrice.

"Forgot? Well, I'll have to hand you a ticket, and maybe you'll remember next time. Lemme see your license."

"I—I haven't any."

The motor cop turned his flash light up into her face. He was one of those policemen, known as camera-eyed, who have a peculiar faculty for carrying in their memory a mental rogues' gallery of wanted criminals.

"What's your name?" he questioned, sternly, eying her with keen, intent gaze.

But by this time, Rush had roused up sufficiently to take a hand.

"It's all right, Reeder." Fortunately, he knew the cop. "This is Miss Baker, assistant manager of our advertising department. I got hurt out in the country, you see, falling off a cliff that I'd climbed like a fool to get some wild flowers. She picked me up, and drove the car, because there was no one else to do it. But I assume all the responsibility. If there are any tickets to be handed out, give them to me."

"Oh, that 'll be O. K., Mr. Hollister." The officer touched his cap. "I didn't recognize you before, all bandaged up that way. And if I'd known the circumstances, I wouldn't have stopped you." He hesitated uncertainly. "This lady, you say, is—?"

"Miss Baker of our advertising department," repeated Rush. Then he dropped his voice to a confidential note. "But I don't mind telling you, Reeder, that very soon she is going to be Mrs. Hollister."

"Oh—er—!" The cop acted as if some one had exploded a firecracker under him. "C-c-congratulations to you, Mr. Hollister, and to you, too, ma'am, I'm sure."

He waved his hand to them to proceed, and Beatrice jumped the car forward in a series of bucks.

"Why did you tell him such an awful lie?" she stormed, indignantly.

"Because there isn't a chance of them catching the highwayman, and to tell about him would only cause us a lot of fuss and notoriety. Much better to explain my injuries as due to an accident."

"I didn't mean that," she started to protest, but Rush, done up by the effort of talking to the cop, had dropped his head back on her shoulder with a groan, and she held her peace. It was not the time now to excite him by coming to a showdown.

Reeder, the policeman, stood gaping after them a full two minutes, as they drove on up the street, pushing back his cap, and bewilderedly scratching at his head. Then, as the roadster turned a corner about five blocks away, and disappeared, he started up his motorcycle, and rode thoughtfully to the police station.

Here he went to the files and began pawing over a great stack of old circulars and handbills requesting information in regard to criminals and missing persons.

While he was engaged upon his task, the door of the station house opened, and Bancroft staggered in. He was bent over, with his hands pressed to his stomach, and his face was ashy-pale, and twisted with agony. Little beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

He zigzagged a step or two across the floor, and lurched down into a chair by the railing. A couple of patrolmen jumped to his assistance.

"I couldn't get any farther," he gasped, in answer to their questions. "I'm all in, with a terrible attack of indigestion. Somebody telephone to Dr. Fickett for me, will you? Then, I guess I'll have to ask one of you boys to get in the car with me and drive me home."

"Sure," responded the officer at the desk, sympathetically. "We'll look out for you, Mr. Bancroft."

He busied himself for a minute or two getting into telephone connection with the physician as requested, then turned to the sufferer again.

"Doc says he'll be over to your house in twenty minutes. Better not start off too quick, though, Mr. Bancroft. Set a mite longer, and get a hold on yourself. You're feelin' easier now, ain't you?"

Bancroft nodded. The paroxysm which had gripped him as he reached the station house was passing. He straightened up, and wiped the perspiration from his face with his handkerchief.

The desk officer looked about the room, and spotted the motorcycle cop over at the files.

"Reeder!" he called.

Reeder glanced up at the summons. Absorbed in his search, he had paid no attention to what was taking place at the front of the room. And just at that moment he had come across what he was seeking, a circular from the Darrel Detective Agency, headed: "One Thousand Dollars Reward!"

Still holding it in his hand, he rose in answer to the beckoning finger of his superior, and came over to the desk.

"Reeder, this is Mr. Bancroft, one of the head men over at Hollister's. His car's outside, and as he ain't feeling so well, I want you to drive him home."

The motor cop turned with a quickened interest to the pale pinched man beside the rail.

"From Hollister's, sir? Then, probably, you know Miss Baker in the advertising department over there?"

Bancroft jerked his head in a curt assent.

"What do you think of that, then?" Reeder displayed the half tone portrait printed at the top of the circular in his hand. "Wouldn't you say, that was the living image of Miss Baker—except, of course, for her wearing bobbed hair? It's the darndest case of a double I ever run across."

Bancroft, gazing at the picture, forgot all about his dyspepsia. He caught the words, "Darrel Detective Agency," and "One Thousand Dollars Reward" above it; and his eyes glinted with a malicious joy. He reached out his hands for the circular.

"Who is it a picture of?" he rasped.

Then he read the line underneath the portrait: "Wanted for Blackmail and Attempted Murder—Beatrice Gore."

Beatrice Gore! Beatrice!

He threw up his head and gave a high, thin cackle of triumph.

But his merriment ended in a choking gasp, for his surge of spiteful exultation brought on another paroxysm of torment, even more severe than before, which stretched him out on the floor and tied him into a dozen bow-knots.

It was not until Dr. Fickett had been summoned on a hurry call to the station house, and a shot of morphine had been administered, that he could be conveyed home. And then he was under strict injunctions to keep quiet and not allow himself to become excited over anything.

CHAPTER XI.

A BERNHARDT FAREWELL.

"WHAT doctor shall I take you to?" Beatrice asked Rush as they came to the central part of town.

"No doctor. There's nothing I can't fix up myself with a little arnica and absorbent cotton and sticking plaster. Drive me home."

"Oh, I can't do that!" she demurred. "Your father and Jennifer are probably still sitting on the porch. It would be a dead give-away that we had been out together."

"Well, what of it?" he countered. "They might as well get used to the idea; for they're going to see us together a whole lot from now on. I was thinking of breaking the glad tidings to 'em to-night."

"Oh, Rush! You'd never do that?" she pleaded in dismay.

"Why not?" he growled a bit suspiciously, struggling up to get a look at her face.

"Well, not yet," she urged evasively. "Let us—let us have it just a secret between ourselves for a little while, anyhow. Please, Rush? Please?"

Then, when he had agreed a little reluctantly to what he regarded as a mere whim, she again began coaxing him to have proper treatment for his injuries.

But on this point he was obstinate.

"No," he said. "I could put over that bunk about falling off a cliff on the motor cop, but a doctor would spot me for a liar in a minute. And, first thing you know, the story of the fracas would be all over town. People might start wondering how you came to have a gun.

"I'll tell you," he suggested an alternative. "You take me over to the factory and telephone 'Uke' to come down there. That's the best bet yet, for he's had experience at this sort of thing, and knows just what to do. He'll fix me up better than any doctor would, and, besides, he can bring me down a change of clothes and let me chuck these rags.

"You missed a cue there, honey," he added in mock reproof. "Your line in answer to that is: 'Rags is royal raiment when worn for virtue's sake!'"

Which proved to Beatrice more conclusively than a certificate from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons that he was rapidly returning to a state of normalcy.

His plan, too, did seem about as good as any that could be proposed; and, accordingly, Beatrice drove him over to the factory, where—since old Peter, the night watchman, recognizing the car, did not trouble to give them close inspection—they were able to gain the seclusion of Room 5, with no one the wiser.

There was a leather couch as a part of the equipment of the advertising department—for Eustace often slept there, when, with an artist's disregard of hours, he remained late over some piece of work he wanted to finish—and Beatrice, seeing that Rush was still pretty shaky, forced him to lie down on it.

Then, when she had arranged the pillows to his liking, and had made him as comfortable as possible, she started for the booth in the hall to telephone Eustace.

"Anything more I can do for you?" she asked, lingering beside him for a moment.

"Well, you might give me a kiss, sweetheart." He caught her hand and pulled her down toward him. "I haven't had one for over two hours, and that's a bad record for a newly engaged man."

She tried to draw back with a laughing excuse, but Rush would not be denied, and she was afraid to oppose him. After all, she salved her conscience, it was no more than the farewell caress she had been cheated of giving him on the road to town.

But this, she found, was no light brushing of her lips across his hair, but an honest-to-goodness smack full on the mouth, and with a kick to it like dynamite.

She was still blushing and trembling from the effect of it when she was finally able to disengage herself from his clasp and flee to the refuge of the telephone booth.

Hoping to escape further mischances of the sort she besought Eustace, after she had guardedly explained over the wire what was wanted of him, to make all speed to the factory; and then, returning to her patient, took a seat across the room and tried to direct the conversation into safe and innocuous channels.

But Rush refused to be denied his prerogatives either as a *fiancé* or an invalid. He insisted on her moving her chair close beside him, where he could hold her hand, and with murmured endearments lay plans, according to the immemorial custom of lovers, for living happily ever afterward.

By the time that Eustace finally arrived upon the scene it must be confessed that Beatrice was a much-kissed young woman.

The appearance of "Uke," however, introduced a different quality into the atmosphere. He was naturally more interested in the martial aspects of the affair than in the sentimental, and as he worked away, sponging abrasions and deftly bandaging cuts, he kept up a running fire of criticism on the battle Rush had put up.

"You oughtn't ever to have clinched with the big stiff," he scolded. "When you whirled that way and caught him off guard you ought to have smashed right to the jaw, and then, while he was jolted from the sock, have jerked the gun out of his hand and jumped back. In a rough and tumble you want to avoid close quarters until you have the other fellow going; then you can bore in and give him the works. Remember that next time, old dear, and you won't come home such a mess as you are to-night."

"Ain't going to be no next time," asserted Rush, flinching a little from the sting of the antiseptic being poured into an open cut at the side of his ear.

"Oh, you can't tell. You and Beatrice might be out again some time, and that business of holding up lonely motorists is getting to be quite a popular trade, I understand. Why, this very bozo may hang around in the neighborhood until his arm heals up where Beatrice nicked him and then pull off another stunt of the same sort."

"I don't think so." Rush shook his head. "He had a Michigan license plate, and is touring, I am certain; one of those flivver hoboes that clutter up the roads nowadays, instead of riding the brake beams. If I believed there was really any question of him sticking around, as you say, I'd be tempted to report the lay-out to the police, no matter what the consequences. But there isn't a chance. I'll bet he's seventy-five miles away by this time, and still going strong."

Eustace looked him over a bit quizzically.

"Don't see how you're going to get out of reporting something, old son," he railed. "I've fixed you up as artistically as I could, but by to-morrow that map of yours is going to be a regular day-after-the-battle extra. There's a mouse over your left eye that I can't get down, and by morning your complexion will be a futurist scramble of blues and greens and yellows. What with that and your various decorations of gauze and sticking plaster, you can hardly show up around town without arousing some comment. Of course, you might play sick and stay in the house, but—"

"No!" broke in Beatrice emphatically. "Remember, Rush, you promised."

"That's right," he assented "the folks would have to be told the truth. You see, Uke," he explained, "Beatrice doesn't want father and Jennifer to know that we were out together to-night."

"Well, in that case"—Eustace reflectively scratched an eyebrow—"I don't see anything for it but to ship you out of town."

"Say, that's an idea!" His mind, fertile at expedients, had already hatched out a scheme. "We'll take your car and run off down to New York for a few days. You know, I've been planning a trip to the city to round up those printing estimates, and it 'll be the most plausible thing in the world that I should want you to go along with me. We'll leave a note for your father and start right off to-night. By gravy, it works out just as if we'd planned it all beforehand. When I left the house I made the excuse to Jennifer that there was a message for me at the telegraph office that I didn't want to take over the phone, and I grabbed up your bag, all packed for going away, with an extra suit in it, and pyjamas, and toothbrushes, and everything."

"But do you think Rush is in any condition to stand a trip like that?" questioned Beatrice apprehensively.

"Sure he is," scoffed Eustace. "A little punching like he got wouldn't harm anybody. The fresh air and the ride 'll only set him up. Anyhow, we won't go farther than Albany for a first stage, and then put up at a hotel, and make the rest of the run to-morrow.

"By heck!" He turned enthusiastically to Rush. "The more I think of it, the more things seem to fit in. You'd have had a hard time explaining to the boss, as I see it, how you managed to get such quick dope on Phaldon, without bringing Bea-

trice's name into it, and that might have spilled the beans for fair. But what more natural than that on this trip to New York you should take time to look the gentleman up and run across some facts that your father didn't tumble to.

"For that matter," he chuckled, "you can account for the scars and scratches that will doubtless be showing on your pan when you return, by claiming that you had a little mix-up with Phaldon and, to keep papa from feeling sore, tell him that if he thinks you look badly he ought to see the other guy.

"Or, if you consider that too raw"—he gave a gesture of concession—"you can pass off the blemishes to your fatal beauty as the result of an auto accident, a taxi run-in, or something of the sort. Oh, we can get away with anything from murder down by saying that it happened in New York."

It did really seem about the most feasible solution for the difficulties that confronted them, so after Rush, with the aid of Eustace, had retired to the lavatory and exchanged his tatters for more suitable traveling garb, they started off, first seeing Beatrice safely to her boarding place in the car.

She begged them not to get out with her, saying that she had her key and would have no trouble getting in; but Rush, climbing creakily from the car, insisted on escorting her to the front door.

Then in the dim shadows of the porch he took her into his arms and kissed her again and again on brow and cheeks and lips.

"God bless you, my dearest!" he murmured. "I'll be thinking of you every hour that I'm away, yearning to be with you."

Finally, after repeated low whistles from the impatient Eustace, he released her and turned away; but before she could open the door and get inside he was back to claim one last and lingering kiss.

"Good-by! Good-by, my wife-to-be!" he said fondly.

Beatrice dodged into the house before he could return, and locking the door stole up the dark stairs, her cheeks flaming, her heart pit-a-patting so that she thought it must awake her landlady and the entire family.

Reaching her room, she turned on the light and, throwing her hat on the bed, moved over to her dresser to gaze at the reflection in its mirror of her flushed and guilty countenance.

"How could I help it?" she muttered defensively. "He was so masterful, and if I had told him then he would have refused to go to New York at all. He would have stood there and argued and made a scene on the doorstep. But it is the last time," she declared sternly. "That was my good-by to him."

Then the humor of the situation struck her and an irresistible peal of laughter bubbled to her lips.

"If I keep on this way," she giggled, "I'll make as many farewells as Sarah Bernhardt."

CHAPTER XII.

AS YOU LOOK AT IT.

A DAY passed away uneventfully. We say that, and yet there is no such thing as an uneventful day—except for the dead. Our lives are what they are, not because of great moments, but because of thousands of little daily influences, unreckoned and unnoticed at the time, but building, building themselves, like the little coral animals under the sea, into the solid fabric of our habits and characters.

Beatrice observed, as she passed through the main office on her way to work that morning, that Mr. Bancroft was not at his desk, and she heard later from one of the stenographers that the chief statistician had been taken with an alarming attack of illness during the night and had come near dying.

Dr. Fickett had ordered him to take a month's complete rest, it was said, and he was leaving that afternoon for some springs in Canada, under instructions to avoid excitement of any kind.

Beatrice never dreamed of connecting the incident in any way with herself; and yet, if she had known all the truth about it, she

would undoubtedly have rated this as a pretty momentous event.

Vastly more important to her seemed a telephone message that came in the course of the morning from Eustace at Albany, ostensibly to give her some directions concerning her work, but really to convey the information that this much of the motor trip had been covered without mishap, and that Rush was feeling as fit as a fiddle, having enjoyed a good sleep. They were starting at once for New York, he said, and expected to arrive there—or in jail—in time for dinner.

And less absorbing than this, but still far more interesting to her than the news concerning Bancroft, was a visit from Jennifer, who had suddenly decided to attend the Yale-Harvard boat race at New London, and had dropped in to bid her a flying good-by.

The dark-eyed girl lingered, however, moving restlessly around the room, and picking up things on Beatrice's desk, only to set them down again. Beatrice gathered the impression that Jennifer had something she wished to confide to her, and yet hesitated to put into words.

"How long do you expect to be gone?" asked Beatrice. She was sorry to have Jennifer leaving, it meant the temporary loss of a companionship that counted a good deal with her. Yet she never thought of attaching any especial significance to the matter. How could she guess all the consequences that were to arise from that little jaunt?

"Oh, I don't know." Jennifer had gone to the window now, and was absently drumming with her fingers on the sill as she watched the elder Hollister direct a gang of workmen at some operations in the yard. "Two or three days; maybe a week.

"Who knows? Perhaps I shall come back engaged." There was a ring of hardness in her laugh. "There are always oodles of stunning men at those college events."

"Why go to New London for that when there is such good material at home?" bantered Beatrice.

Jennifer wheeled abruptly, and shot a guarded, intent glance at her.

"Who do you mean?" she inquired abruptly.

"Why, Eustace Blake, of course, and Ru—and young Mr. Hollister."

Jennifer turned back to the window.

"Oh, those kids!" she shrugged. "Eustace and Rush are like an old pair of shoes, good to have around, but not inspiring. No, I think I'll have to go to New London and pick me up a sheik."

She stood looking out until the job she was watching in the yard had been completed and the proprietor of the plant had gone back to his office. Then she turned again to Beatrice. There was a hint of pain in her dark, lovely eyes, a strained expression about her mouth.

"Helen, I want to ask you something," she said a little breathlessly. "Do you think a woman ought ever to propose?"

Beatrice involuntarily laid her hand against her breast, as if to ease the catch at her heart. She was certain she knew the significance of the question. Jennifer was growing impatient at Rush's inexplicable slowness in speaking, and was planning to force the engagement which she herself, his father, and all the town regarded as foreordained.

Yet Beatrice knew that such as impulsive action on Jennifer's part at this time would only serve to humiliate the girl, and perhaps permanently defeat the very object at which she aimed by bringing out disclosures which would destroy any chance of an ultimate marriage between her and Rush.

Rush, with his affections otherwise engaged, and refusing to accept as final the rejection she intended to give him—Beatrice knew his obstinate temperament—would simply tell Jennifer with brotherly candor that, so far as she was concerned, he was out of the book. As a sister, she was ace-high with him, but as a wife, she didn't qualify.

At any cost, the girl must be prevented from provoking so unhappy a fiasco; and yet Beatrice could tell from the defiant lift of Jennifer's chin and the mutinous flash in her eye that she was very close to rushing the ropes in some fashion.

"Should a woman ever propose?" she re-

peated the question, tapping her pencil tip against her teeth as if considering an abstraction. "Why, I don't know. I suppose there might be cases where it would be all right, but I can hardly imagine one. There's an old saying, you know, that any woman who hasn't a hump on her back or a wart on her nose, can marry any man she wants to; and I believe there's a good deal of truth in it. I know I could have been engaged a dozen times over, and I guess you could triple that number.

"No," she laughed, "for the woman to propose strikes me a good deal like going after trout with a club. You may get your fish, but it isn't sporting. The thrill is in making the cast, hooking your trout, and then playing him, reeling in and out, until you finally bring him to the landing net."

"But suppose you've got a trout that won't bite?" muttered Jennifer sullenly.

"Then cast again and again, until he does bite. Fishermen consider it a big feather in their cap when they finally land some wary old fellow who sulks behind a rock, and won't go after even the most tempting bait."

"Wary old fellow?" repeated Jennifer with a challenging inflection. Again that odd, secretive look.

"Well, wary young fellow, then, if it suits you better," said Beatrice. "And, old or young, dear, I don't see how even the crustiest woman hater could hold out against you. But the point I was trying to make is that there is more satisfaction in winning a hard game than an easy one. You take my advice, honey, and stick to the old-fashioned methods. Just keep dangling your hook and sooner or later he will rise to it. The time and place will come, and you'll be the girl."

"Yes, when I'm eighty in the shade, and have lost all my teeth." Jennifer's mouth twisted rebelliously. "Still, I suppose you are right, Helen. It would be pretty bad to be refused, wouldn't it?"

She broke off with a glance at her watch.

"Well, I'm keeping you from your work, I know, and I really must be getting along to the station. Good-by, dear." She gave Beatrice a quick hug and a hurried peck on the cheek. "And forget all the foolishness I've been talking. I'll see what the fishing is like at New London, anyhow, before I do anything rash."

Her laugh floated back as she went out the door—a laugh with a note of recklessness in it.

Beatrice returned to her work, and since no further interruptions occurred, continued absorbed in it, except for the brief cessation at lunch time, until the whistle blew at five o'clock.

Then she closed down her desk and walked home. After dinner she took a short motor ride with Mr. and Mrs. Colfax, the people she boarded with, and on their way back, passed the Hollister residence. The manufacturer was sitting alone on the porch smoking, and waved his hand to them in a rather dispirited fashion.

"I guess the old fellow misses Jennifer," said Mrs. Colfax. "He's so used to having her around with him in the evenings."

"Where do you get that 'old fellow' stuff?" growled her husband, who, beginning to get a little *passé* himself, was touchy on the subject of age. "Hollister is no Methusaleh; not over forty-eight at the outside. The fact that he's got a grown son and has been at the head of the plant so long makes people think of him as elderly. But from the way he kicks up his heels at dances, I don't think you could class him as exactly decrepit."

Beatrice said nothing, but it came to her as a little shock to realize that Rush's father was not so thoroughly on the shelf, as, taking her viewpoint from that of the town, she had always appraised him. True, his hair was iron-gray, but he was young enough in his outlook and habits, and was manifestly in his physical prime. Why, she wondered, had he never married again? Many men marry at a much more advanced age than forty-eight.

Before they reached home, though, the matter had been driven from her mind by another slightly perturbing incident.

At the Main Street intersection the open car in which they were riding was halted by a traffic block, and as they sat there, Reeder, the motor cycle cop, came wheeling up and stopped directly beside them.

He recognized Beatrice and touched his cap with a polite "Good evening, Miss Baker."

His manner was perfectly respectful, yet the way he kept looking at her until the signal changed and they started on again—almost as if he were studying her features—made her feel uneasy and self-conscious.

It was only a temporary irritation, though, and by the time they reached the house it too had passed from her thoughts.

She had no engagements for that evening, and as no callers appeared she presently went up to her room and occupied herself until bedtime in darning stockings and looking after her mending.

Finally she undressed and, saying her prayers—not forgetting a special petition for the safety of Rush, exposed to all the perils of the great city—retired for the night.

A quiet day in which nothing had happened, she thought as she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

SO'S YOUR OLD MAN.

MRS. COLFAX was right, Mr. Hollister was lonely.

Used to the chatter and light laughter of young people around him, to be suddenly bereft of Jennifer, Rush and Eustace all in one day threw him off keel, so to speak.

The house seemed empty and silent when he came home to it in the evening, and his solitary dinner tasteless without the salt of the gay badinage to which he was accustomed.

He pushed back his plate and, leaving the table, wandered about from room to room, not knowing what to do with himself. He turned on the radio, but soon shut it off again. What good was a lot of jazz when there was no one to dance to it?

Finally he drifted out to the porch and gloomed there for the rest of the evening, about as blue and bored a man of forty-eight as could be found anywhere outside of a penitentiary.

The sight of Beatrice and the Colfaxes driving by created a slight flicker of interest for him. He wished afterward that he had called them in; that Miss Baker was good company, almost as lively and entertaining as Jennifer. But by the time the idea occurred to him their car had passed on out of sight.

The thought gave him an inspiration, however. It would be three or four days, possibly longer, before any of the members of his errant family returned; and he vowed he'd be hanged if he was going to sit around another evening like this with no one to talk to, and nothing to do but twiddle his thumbs.

There was a dance at a neighboring country club the next night. Why wouldn't it be a good plan to invite Miss Baker and the Colfaxes to go out there as his guests for dinner and remain afterward for the dancing?

Full of this idea he went back the next morning as soon as he had finished his mail to Room 5, to broach it to Beatrice.

She was reading a letter as he entered—rereading it, rather; for it was one that had come to her at Colfax's from Rush, telling her of his safe arrival in New York, and full of tender expressions.

Absorbed in it, she was not conscious of Mr. Hollister's presence until he was almost at her desk; and then, overwhelmed with confusion, fearful lest he should see and recognize the handwriting, she folded the letter over quickly and slipped it under some papers in front of her.

There was a touch of guilty haste about her action, as well as in her hurriedly averted eyes and the color which flamed up into her cheeks grated a little on Hollister. In spite of himself that invidious warning of Bancroft's recurred to his mind, that nobody knew where this girl came from or anything else about her.

But his flash of suspicion was only for a second. Instantly he was defending her to himself. There might be a dozen reasons for her show of embarrassment. To be caught by the boss trifling during working hours was enough to fluster almost any employee. Or perhaps the letter she had been reading was from an old sweetheart back wherever she came from? The vivid

blush that had swept up over her face and the shy dropping of her glance made this seem a more likely conjecture.

He therefore pretended to take no notice of her disquietude, but smilingly laid his suggestion for the evening before her.

"I want you to take pity on a deserted father and guardian, Miss Baker. The cats are away—I wonder what Jennifer would do if she heard me call her that?—so let's you and I and Mr. and Mrs. Colfax have a mouse frolic out at the Highcrest Country Club this evening. What do you say?"

Her constraint disappeared under the pleasant cordiality of his manner.

"Why, I think it would be delightful, Mr. Hollister. And I'm very sure that Mr. and Mrs. Colfax will be only too glad to go. If you'll wait just a minute I'll telephone and make sure of their acceptance."

The Colfaxes, as it proved, were agreeable, and accordingly the party started out that evening in Mr. Hollister's big, luxurious car, he himself doing the driving, with Beatrice on the front seat beside him.

Under the new conception she had gained of him, Beatrice was surprised to note how boyish and alert he appeared. It makes a great difference in your opinion of a person, and also in his own conduct, whether you regard him as a tottering veteran or as one still full of the zest of life.

She very quickly learned, too, that there was no difficulty in talking to her host. All she had to do was to dial the conversation to the topic of Jennifer and, like the brook, he could go on forever. Her beauty, her charm, her sprightliness, her competence in managing his household; he was able, apparently, to keep broadcasting Jennifer's merits forever. And Beatrice was so genuine and sincere an admirer of the girl that he could not have found a listener more to his liking.

They drove and talked of Jennifer, ate and talked of Jennifer, danced and talked of Jennifer, and so got along famously. Hollister told himself that he hadn't passed such an agreeable evening in a long time. And he was still full of enthusiasm for his subject, and going strong, when, somewhat after midnight, they left the club and started for home.

"But aren't you afraid of losing Jennifer, letting her run off this way?" Beatrice broke in on him teasingly. "She is threatening to grab off a sheik over there at the boat races."

"Oh, that is a standard joke with her," he laughed. "No; Jennifer will never leave us. Some of these days, I suppose, she and Rush will decide that they have had enough skylarking around and will settle down to matrimony."

But somehow he did not seem especially enraptured at the prospect. He sighed as he spoke, and fell into a reverie and, as Beatrice was feeling a bit pensive herself, they rode for a time in silence. Mr. and Mrs. Colfax were practically asleep on the back seat.

They had traveled a mile or two in this fashion, and Beatrice, with a qualm of compunction, was just about to bestir herself to start the conversation again, when out of a side road came the clattering bark of a motor cycle, and in another moment Reeder, the cop, ranged up beside them.

"Hello, Mr. Hollister!" he said, hastily, as the manufacturer drew up at his hail. "Sorry to stop you, but I want to know if you passed an old touring flivver between here and the country club?"

"Not that I noticed." Hollister shook his head. "No; I'm sure I didn't. We haven't met more than three cars, and they were—"

"Then I've missed him!" Reeder interrupted, with a growl of chagrin. "He must have turned off at Chaney's after all. Well, no use trying to get him now. He's safe, back in the hills."

"What has happened?" questioned Mr. Hollister. "Somebody you are chasing after?"

Reeder nodded.

"Stick-up," he explained, tersely. "Lucky I happened to come along, or it might have been worse. I'd been over to Cupola Rock on another matter and was heading back home when just before I reached that glade where the spooners hang out, I heard a woman screeching, and speeded up to see what was the trouble. It was a highway job all right. The man and woman were out of their car, and they run toward

me, hollering that they'd been robbed; but I didn't waste no time on them. I was after the yegg that done it.

"He'd heard me coming, you see, and beat it, but my headlight was on and I got a good slant at him as he chased out of the glade and piled into his flivver. A dark, heavy-set man he was, looked like some sort of a foreigner and had a bandage on his right wrist."

A slight, involuntary gasp from Beatrice drew his attention, and he peered toward where she sat crouched back on the other side of the car. He said nothing, but she felt sure that in spite of the darkness, his keen gaze had recognized her.

"We ain't had no trouble of that kind in this neighborhood," he went on with his story, "at least, none that's been reported to us.

"But I understand that in other sections it's got to be pretty serious. This holding up of motoring couples, I mean. The men are beaten unconscious, or even murdered, and the women often maltreated. It'd make your blood run cold, Mr. Hollister, to read some of the circulars we get from the South and West.

"So," he bit his words off incisively, "when I seen this dirty tramp, and realized what he'd been up to, I told myself that I had to get him. I took right out after him, and I gave the old wheel here every ounce of power that she's got. Lickety-split, we come down that steep hill back of Chaney's, him and me for it, circling them sharp bends without neither one of us ever thinking of a brake.

"But he was too foxy for me." The policeman shook his head glumly. "At that corkscrew curve about halfway down, he dumped a couple of gallons or more of oil, I guess. I struck it and skidded clean across the road, and down over that high bank of rocks at the right." He pointed to a dark, greasy smear on one side of his uniform, and a torn sleeve as evidence of the mishap.

"Got out of it easy at that, I reckon," he muttered. "Anyhow, by the time I'd pulled myself and the old girl here back on to the road, and had got started again, Mr. Yegg, of course, was out of sight. Then I had to make a choice, whether to follow him out back of Chaney's, or to keep on this way and I sort of figured that, not knowing the country, he'd be more apt to stick to the main road, which was evidently a mistake.

"Maybe he does know the country," he speculated, thoughtfully. "Maybe this ain't the first trick he's pulled around here, nor the dozenth for that matter. Trouble is, with them kind of jobs, the folks concerned, 'less'n there is pretty serious damage, won't do no squawking. They're afraid of the publicity; they'd rather be robbed in most cases, than to have to explain where they was. Come to think of it, though, I have been hearing sort of whispers among the young fellows down around the garage, that it wasn't altogether safe to be out sparking on the roads these nights."

He wheeled suddenly, and shot a sharp question across at Beatrice.

"You're sure, Miss Baker, it was from falling off a cliff, that Rush got hurt last night?"

Beatrice hesitated a second. She had been wondering whether, in view of this second outrage and Reeder's disclosures concerning it, she ought not to tell what had happened and perhaps add details that would serve to identify the miscreant. But Rush and Eustace had both been so emphatic in advising silence, that she did not feel like going against their bidding.

"Rush hurt?" Mr. Hollister turned to her with a startled exclamation. "What was that?"

"Why—why, he and I were out driving last night," faltered Beatrice, "and I saw some wild flowers on top of a bank at the side of the road and asked him to get them for me. And—and then he slipped, or a branch broke that he was holding onto, or something, and he fell down. But he wasn't really hurt," she fibbed, eagerly, "not much anyway; just scratched a little, and shaken up."

"Looked to me like he was pretty near all in, when I saw him," remarked Reeder, dryly. "And it must have been more than a mere scratch or two, when he couldn't drive his own car."

"Oh, he was just dazed," protested Beatrice. "I told you he was shaken up. Those bandages I put on were what made him look so ghastly." She felt that she was telling her story very stumblingly and unconvincingly, and that they must know she was lying.

"Why, do you think I would have allowed him to start off to New York, if he had actually been injured?" she appealed, desperately to Mr. Hollister. And then she felt like biting her tongue off for the slip. That was a rather possessive tone for her to take in regard to a young man who was supposed to be only an ordinary acquaintance.

"Er—do you think he would have started on a trip like that, I mean?" she amended, lamely, thereby stressing her blunder.

"Humph!" said Mr. Hollister.

Reeder, realizing that somehow he had created a strained situation, backed away with his motor cycle.

"Well, I guess I'll be moving on," he said awkwardly, and with a series of popping explosions swept off down the road.

Mr. Hollister also started on. He did not ask any questions, and Beatrice did not feel called upon to offer anything further by way of explanation; and beyond a few comments on the robbery, neither did the Colfaxes have anything to say.

Consequently, the remainder of the drive was made in almost complete silence; and when the three guests got out of the car, there was only an exchange of brief good nights and the usual perfunctory thanks for a pleasant evening.

Beatrice, evading any interchange with her landlady, went hurriedly to her room, to sit there in the darkness in quaking dismay. She knew the matter could not end like this. Mr. Hollister was bound to seek further information, either from her or Reeder. If he went to the cop, there was almost certain to be some reference to the engagement which Rush had so precipitately announced; and then look out for the fireworks!

If, on the other hand, he came to her, what was she to say? A refusal to speak would only serve to confirm whatever suspicions he had; and if she talked, she would soon become tangled up under his grilling questions. She seemed involved in a coil from which there was no escape.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hollister was likewise perching on the side of his bed, frowningly reviewing facts and suggestions to which he had hitherto given little attention.

The manufacturer was frankly puzzled. There was no reason, of course, why Rush should not take Miss Baker for a drive if he wanted to. But he had rather gathered that the two didn't hit it off very well together.

And why were they so dog-goned secretive about it? It would have been only natural that the girl during the course of the evening should have made some mention of his son's accident; but she had never breathed a word until it was literally dragged out of her by Reeder's questions. Was there something going on that was being kept from him?

Rush, he recalled now, had been acting rather peculiarly ever since he came back, as if he had something on his mind. Yes, and, by jinks, this Baker girl had shown up at Glendale and come to the factory just about the time of the boy's return! The heir to Hollister's might easily be regarded as promising game by an unscrupulous woman. Did she have the lad compromised in any way?

He shook his head impatiently. The girl didn't seem that sort at all. So far as he could tell, she seemed absolutely sincere and aboveboard; you couldn't help liking her. Still that might be only a pose. That incident of the letter she had so hastily hidden came back to him, and with it a recollection of Bancroft's vague aspersions. There was certainly something mighty funny about it—something that he could not understand at all.

He'd have to hold a session with his son as soon as Rush got back from New York, and find out what was at the bottom of the matter.

No, by George, he couldn't wait for that. He'd have it out with the girl herself, first thing in the morning.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

John Smith and Wife

By JOHN D. SWAIN

THERE are names so universally known that they have become symbols. Think for yourself: a certain comedian of the screen, the world's richest man, the champion heavyweight, the inventor of a panacea for ailing women—you know the sort of names I mean.

In this limited class of celebrities, this boiled-down Blue Book of America, belongs the name of Mr. Clarence Chutney, often spoken of as the Condiment King. Unless your digestive tract is a total loss, you have at one time or another added zest to your chop or salad or fish course by reaching for one of the many glass bottles bearing his honored name, though not his features. Never had the genial, good-looking bachelor descended so far as to permit his face to beam upon an addict from one of his red and black labels.

In private life he was rather a high-hat. He belonged to good clubs, sailed his own yacht, played a decent game of golf, and was not too awkward forking a polo pony.

He played auction for high stakes, and usually won; wore distinguished clothes, and had villas and shooting lodges and apartments and bungalows in various climes, and was an altogether agreeable millionaire-plus of just over forty, who had created a mighty business and had the intelligence to surround himself with capable subordinates until now, in the very prime of life, he only appeared in person when some matter of grave importance called him to the offices in the new thirty-story building he owned in Boston, not far from the customhouse.

Such an emergency now confronted him, and at a time when he was most unwilling to leave his big place on the Maine coast. It was right in the midst of dog-day weather, and his newspaper drew scorching pictures of Boston sweltering without its east wind.

He was paying devoted attention to a charming widow, upon whom he had about made up his mind to bestow his name and condiments. He had a large and jolly house party at Ebb Tide, his shore place.

But underneath his veneer of good fellow remained the hard shell of an astute financier. Chutney might grumble—even swear a little; but always, in the end, his pleasures yielded to his business interests.

Without troubling his guests, he prepared to make the run down to Boston. The only person—aside from his butler and his valet, who were not persons, but automatons—to whom he confided the sudden call was Natalie Peverill, the attractive widow, a sterilized blonde of about his own age, but not looking it. And her he assured of his return by the following afternoon.

The amazing circumstance demanding

his personal attention arose from the untimely arrival in Boston of a lanky Briton.

Englishmen never seem to pay much attention to weather. They prowl through tropic jungles or clamber over polar bergs with a bored air, garnering a rare skin for themselves, or a few thousand square miles for the empire, with equal nonchalance. It was in this grand manner that Mr. Roxhall Caine-Sturges had strolled into Boston at a time when all Bostonians who had the price were fleeing from it.

Caine-Sturges himself is no mean figure in the world of curries, relishes and chilis. It is upon his bottles of Gloucestershire sauce that you may read the melancholy fact that the secret of its formula was purchased from an old and distinguished county family, in whose possession it had been ever since the days of Good Queen Bess, and who, overtaken by financial embarrassment, had been prevailed upon to sell it to the original Caines-Sturges for an impressive number of guineas.

This particular sauce Clarence Chutney had long desired to add to his already impressive stable. Its reputation was world-wide, and it was used wherever jaded appetites abide.

It may be found in smart clubs and hotels, as well as on quick-lunch counters and in sad boarding houses. No less than a dozen big concerns, wholesale grocers and the like, had made overtures for its purchase.

Rumors were prevalent, as rumors should properly be. Gossip flew in the world of condiments. But until Chutney had received a telegram from the taciturn Briton he had given no sign that he was ready to talk business.

A personal interview in Boston entailed a night in town, to which Chutney looked forward to with grim resignation. His Maine coast place was remote; and it was after a complex journey, during which he had made use of a small river steamboat, an automobile, and a railroad coach, that he stepped onto the platform of the North Station in what would have been the cool of the evening, had it been cool. As it was, it was just evening.

During the long, dusty run he had whiled away the time by thinking much about Natalie Peverill. She had a noble nature—a quiet courage visibly and touchingly expressed in the pathetic droop of sensitive lips.

Poor child! Chutney so thought of her, although as a matter of fact she was somewhat older than himself; but he did not know this, as Natalie had forgotten to mention it. And how she understood him! And how sweetly patient she was in her comparative poverty!

Her first husband must have been a rotter, he reflected. A vagrant actor of small parts, a clever but unsuccessful musician, collector of silly things like old prints and early pewter, always in debt, and inefficient even in death.

He took so long dying that there remained of his estate not even one of his beloved pewter tankards. Nothing for poor Natalie but the little patrimony she inherited from her father, and her social prestige as his daughter.

To be sure, there was Ardeen, her daughter—a liability rather than an asset. Pretty girl, her mother claimed, but brainless. Heartless as well. Wouldn't do a thing to second Natalie's ambition to marry her off to some youngster with money and a good standing in society.

Bohemian, like Peverill. The taint of the two-a-day in her veins. A bitter trial to her mother, and an expense, too, until she had run away from home. Probably on the stage now—or banging a piano in some night club—or worse!

Natalie's big brown eyes always filled when she spoke of her. But at least she was relieved of all expense on her account. The girl had the decency not to write home for money.

Probably when he and Natalie married she would turn up to receive forgiveness—and an allowance! Well—if he had his way she wouldn't get so much as a bottle of his Onion Relish.

The thought of the relish brought the visiting Briton to his mind, the inspiration of his hasty trip to Boston. He was confident that he could handle Caine-Sturges. He didn't want to drive a hard bargain; what he wanted was Gloucestershire Sauce,

and he was prepared to pay all it was worth to control this noble condiment, with its flavor of an ancient British manor and landed gentry and all that.

But he needed elbow room. It was vital that he see Caine-Sturges alone. If rivals were present, all bidding against one another and against Chutney, there was no telling what might happen. The price would be artificially jacked up to a figure he wouldn't be justified in paying—one that would absorb the profits of Gloucestershire Sauce for a generation to come.

It has been hinted that the world of condiments is one of rumors, a sensitive realm in which one must move with circumspection.

The arrival of Caine-Sturges would not pass unheeded. By now a dozen of Chutney's business rivals would know of it, and their ears and noses would be alert for developments. The arrival of Chutney himself would be a coincidence too obvious to pass unnoted. And were he to register at any of his clubs, or at one of the big hotels, it would be front-page news.

That was the sort of name he bore. It would bring to Boston a flock of hungry rivals by fast express, automobile, steam yacht, quite likely by airplane! And the beans—or the sauce—would be spilled.

Ordinarily, Chutney would have taxied direct from the North Station to his favorite Beacon Street club. Shortly he would be sipping from a long glass containing much cracked ice, a fresh lime, two oat straws, and other ingredients.

But prudence forbade the exposure of his name or person in so public a place. Creature comfort must give place to business necessity. It was not the first time that he had taken refuge in anonymity, but never before had he found it necessary to bury himself obscurely in a second-rate hotel.

Diagonally opposite one side of the North Station stands the Aroostook House. If to be old is to be venerable, this hostelry is one of the most respectable ones in all New England. But, alas! the Aroostook bears its years with a soiled rakishness.

It is sooty outside from the smoke of generations of engines; and it is furtive inside. Its furnishings are of the marble and black walnut and red plush era, and they are worn and grimy.

It has had its youthful dream. It hoped to catch the swell tourist trade, whose portal the North Station is. It even had a gaudy bridal chamber; but no one hundred per cent bride has beheld it in, lo! these many years.

Nevertheless, it had thrived by means of its famous bar; oyster and liquor. It was the last—and first—oasis for the thirsty myriads heading to or from the North Station. And now that, too, was gone; and of the patrons of the old house, two-thirds wore the uniforms of gobs and marines, or the rough garb of lumberjacks and deck hands.

Toward the Aroostook House, known to him only by name and location, Mr. Clarence Chutney now made his way after dining in the depot restaurant. He crossed the silent lobby and was greeted sadly by the desk clerk, who swung toward him a soiled register, at the same time removing for his use a scratchy pen from a large raw potato. To the noble rolls Chutney added with a flourish, these words: " John Smith, Portland, Me."

He was pleased with the originality of his idea. There are so many Smiths, you know; and most of them seemed to be christened John. Even in Portland, not a large city, there must be hundreds of them!

What could be less arresting—more anonymous—than this *nom de plume?* He wondered if the idea had ever occurred to any one else craving oblivion.

" I want a good room," he told the clerk; " with a bath. As good a room as you have; and I'll pay for it in advance. One night only."

The melancholy clerk proclaimed that it would set him back three berries.

" That the best you have?" Chutney protested, handing over a five dollar bill.

" Yeah; our rates are seventy-five cents up. This is a swell room. They say Charles Dickens and President Arthur has both slept in it. I dunno; that was before my time."

He gestured languidly to a decrepit bellman, who took Chutney's hand grip and

the big brass key, and piloted him to a palsied elevator in which the bellman doubled as operator.

After a tremulous ascent Chutney found himself in a long corridor, down which he followed his guide around a corner, and so to a door bearing a cracked china number plate on its scarred panel.

The door opened upon a room whose faded red hangings, caught by tarnished gilt cords, sepulchral black walnut bed, and vast easy chairs with tidies over their backs, were dominated by an enormous mirror flanked by two steel engravings depicting important but depressing gatherings of historic American statesmen.

The despondent bellman drew up the windows and lowered the shades, loosening a cloud of dust, lighted a couple of musical gas jets, and turned to ask if there was anything else he could do to make the place seem homy.

"You might fetch some ice-water," Chutney said, and gave him a half dollar tip.

The aged one seemed stricken by the size of the coin. He looked at it incredulously. His lips parted, possibly to state that he could not make change; but what he finally said was: "Mister, do you want a highball? We got some good Scotch!"

Mr. Chutney did want one. Never more ardently. To be sure, it was risky. Might even blind him! But—he reflected as he gazed mournfully about him—even blindness would not be without its compensations in a room like this!

II.

The Aroostook is one of those aged buildings which is blessed with as many exits as a Swiss cheese. This has come innocently about through the alterations and additions of many generations, but is not without its advantages for present day patronage.

To Chutney's casual glance the lobby had seemed deserted by all save the listless desk clerk and the aged bellman; but in fact his arrival had been observed with a lively interest by a young gentleman who had at the moment entered from the far corner behind a long deceased palm beneath which stood the ice water tank, usually dry.

Mr. John Clabby was head of the advertising department at Chutney's, and having an hour to wait for the train which was to bear him to Canada on the firm's business, he had visited the Aroostook, in an obscure corner of whose basement favored ones could obtain certain outlawed beverages. He had just mounted the cellar stairs, kit-bag in hand, when to his genuine surprise he beheld the president and chief stockholder of his company in the act of registering at the desk.

Clabby's surprise was justified. He had no idea that Chutney was in town during this period of perspiration, prostrations, and profanity. But far more amazing was it to find his millionaire employer a guest of a hotel in which Clabby himself, though condescending to buy a drink now and then, would not have dreamed of putting up overnight unless mortally stricken by his potations.

His first impulse was to hail Mr. Chutney blithely from across the lobby. It was Clabby's impulse always to hail blithely any one he knew, anywhere.

He was known as a good mixer, and a good fixer. A little roly-poly man whose clothes were always prophetic of next season's ready-to-wears, a clever mimic and a story teller and lover of practical jokes, the fact that neither he nor any of Chutney's employees outside of three or four executives, had more than a formal bowing acquaintance with the Condiment King, would not have deterred Clabby from hailing him, slapping him on the back, offering him a good cigar and an anecdote not so good.

But even as his lips opened a rare impulse of caution sealed them again. He was not wholly a fool; and he reflected that if the great man had come to such a hostelry on such a night, it had certainly not been done to court publicity. For some reason Chutney desired to soft-pedal his presence in town.

Very well; Clabby would be discreet. He would slip quietly up to his room five minutes later, and have a little chat before the Flying Bluenose left. He wanted to

ask the boss what he thought of that last advertising layout Clabby had made for Onion Relish.

He accordingly lurked behind the dry palm and the equally dry water-tank until the old bellman had conducted Chutney into the elevator; whereupon Clabby crossed the lobby to consult the register, and learn from it the number of Chutney's room.

The bored clerk—whom he knew very well—had retired to his cubby, elevated his feet on the ancient iron safe, and was smoking with his back to him. He did not see Clabby as he swung the soiled register about and peered at the last entry, its ink still wet. What Clabby read brought to his face a look of intense astonishment, followed by a knowing grin.

"Why, the old tomcat!" he breathed, blinking his eyes and half doubtful if they had read aright.

Then, moved by an impulse as natural to him as breathing, he glanced up and about, satisfied himself that he was unobserved, yanked the pen from its quivering potato, and rapidly added the two words "and wife," to the signature. After which he picked up his grip and stole almost guiltily across the lobby once more, to slip behind the palm and down the steps.

His merry prank called for one more drink; and from the basement there was an exit directly across from the North Station train shed. He wished that he could hang around and see what—if anything—happened, or that he dared spill the joke to old Joe at the bar; but twenty minutes later found him in his section on the Montreal express, his secret unshared.

Unaware that two words of highly explosive potentiality had been added to his signature, Chutney was making himself as comfortable as possible in his room of tarnished splendors. He had changed to thin silk pyjamas and straw sandals, lighted a more expensive cigar than had perfumed the premises for half a century at least, and now took from his hand bag a colored layout of the latest advertising campaign of his stimulating condiments.

The design was one of John Clabby's inspired creations. It depicted a fat French chef with white cap and waxed mustaches, lifting the cover from a steaming casserole to pour into it a few drops of sauce. From the dish protruded the half cooked remnant of a leather heel; and the lettering read:

EVEN YOUR OLD SLIPPERS COULD BE MADE PALATABLE BY ONION RELISH

Something about it irritated the proprietor of Onion Relish. It may have been the hot night, the dusty red plush and heavy, tarnished gilt molding of his apartment. But—while not quite prepared to veto the pride of Clabby's heart—the thought of a ragout of old footwear, even though seasoned with the subtly persuasive Onion Relish, created an unhappy feeling in his stomach.

He sipped his iced drink, wrinkling his nose with disgust. Presently he tossed the layout aside, and for a time buried himself in the cool and judicious pages of the untemperamental *Evening Transcript*. Then he turned off the musical gas jets and clambered into bed.

All things considered, he slept surprisingly well. The stealthy goings and comings in the carpeted hall outside his door did not disturb him. He ignored the all-night clangor of the near-by railroad terminal. And the ghosts of Charles Dickens and President Arthur, alike distinguished for their tastes in raiment, did not materialize in this State Chamber tradition assigned to them. Fetid dawn laid a languid hand upon his brow and awakened him.

Chutney rose and tubbed in lukewarm water. It was far too early to think of calling on Caine-Sturges at his hotel; but he decided that it would be pleasanter to breakfast before the heat of the day banished appetite.

What was it the Englishman had said? Terse words, yet formal and courteous. A stiff request that he would honor and favor him by calling, this forenoon, at the Tureen. Message forwarded from Chutney's Boston office, to which it had doubtless been telephoned by Caine-Sturges.

Never before, he reflected, as he groped for a morsel of pale green soap that sought

to evade him in the rust streaked tub, had he evinced the slightest readiness to sell Gloucestershire Sauce. For, of course, that must be the reason of his visit and his message. There could be no other. How his American rivals would gnash their teeth when they learned that Chutney had added this titled sauce to his pungent family!

It might be a good idea to carry Caine-Sturges off with him to Ebb Tide. Postpone all talk of a deal until he had won his esteem. He wasn't afraid to exhibit his big country place, even to a Britisher. He'd make of him a paying guest!

He chuckled at the thought. Not that he wanted to beat down the price. He was willing to pay full value; but one can always do business more satisfactorily after the social contact has been established. Too damned hot to talk shop here in Boston.

Caine-Sturges would admire Natalie Peverill, he thought. There was a little woman with class! She'd know just how to play up to the offish, diffident London type of guest. He was glad she was, so to speak, the unofficial chatelaine of his house party.

Dressed at last, and carrying his grip, Chutney left a half dollar on his pillow for the chambermaid, and without bothering to ring up the decrepit elevator, walked down worn marble stairs and through a family entrance—one of the Aroostook's many exits—to the street.

There was in the neighborhood a celebrated sea grill, where he would breakfast. By the time he had done so and finished his morning paper his State Street offices would be open, and he would look in there and kill a little time until it was reasonable to presume that Caine-Sturges had breakfasted at the Tureen.

His own simple meal finished, a thought occurred to him. That advertising layout of Clabby's—had he put it back in his hand bag? He opened it; and it was not there. Must have tossed it aside in the hotel, and left it there. It had been mailed up to him from the home office, and he must return it with his O. K. or a "kill," as his mood dictated. That was why he had fetched it along, instead of remailing it.

Well, it was only a few steps around the corner to the Aroostook. He made his way back through the family entrance—another one this time—looked about without finding the elevator, and remounted the single flight to the room he had never expected, nor desired, to see again. Its door was ajar, as he had left it. He pushed it open and stepped inside.

Upon the tousled bed, eyes closed, the only sign of life an incoherent muttering which came from pallid lips, lay an unusually pretty but disheveled girl, whose little *cloche* hat had fallen or been tossed to the floor beside her. And as Clarence Chutney stared with uncomprehending eyes at this incredible visitor to the apartment recently honored by himself, and at a remoter period by an eminent author and a President, a slight noise behind him caused him to wheel sharply about.

In the doorway, whose width he nearly filled, lounged a strange man, a sardonic gleam in his bilious yellow eyes.

III.

CLARENCE CHUTNEY had never, so far as he knew, clapped eyes on a hotel detective; but instinct assured him that he was now being appraised by one—a big man, running to fat, but undoubtedly powerful, and wearing loose blue serge clothes that looked as if he had slept in them, topped by a straw hat with a soiled but gaudy band.

He had a sallow face and thick black mustache, and although not at the moment chewing a black cigar, two such peeped from a breast pocket.

"Wife sick?" he grunted. "Heard a queer noise from your room, and thought I'd give things the once over."

Chutney moistened dry lips with his tongue.

"She's not my wife," he said. "I never saw her before!"

"Yeah?"

The bilious eyes insolently took inventory of the apartment. They seemed to miss nothing: the sticky glass in its tray on the bureau, the half dollar still lying on one of the pillows, the colored display card where it had been tossed onto a chair.

They took note of something Chutney had not before observed: a thin round paper box lying near one of the girl's hands. The big man crossed the room and picked it up, examining the label.

"Not your wife, huh? You're registered here as John Smith and wife, anyhow. Where *is* Mrs. Smith?"

"I'm registered as John Smith," Chutney corrected him. "And here alone."

The house detective covered the push button beside the door with a big thumb. To the bellman—a young fellow this morning—who presently appeared, he whispered a few words, and then turned back to the restless figure on the bed.

"Oh, John, you have broken my heart!" Her words were audible to both men. Despite himself, Chutney's eyes fell before the sardonic regard of the detective's.

"There's morphine pills in this box, or so it states. In one-eighth grain doses. I gotta call a doctor! Shanahan takes care of our hotel; I'll give him a ring."

Chutney's hand thrust forward in protest. The shock of surprise and alarm was clearing from his brain.

"Don't do that," he urged. "Let me call my own physician! He'll be at home at this hour, and can get here as quick as any one."

The big man paused, but regarded him suspiciously.

"Your own physician, hey? Who is this bird—some quack?"

"He's Larson, of the Huntington Hospital staff, and a member of the Harvard Medical faculty. No one rates higher in Boston."

"Well, if he'll cut out all red tape. Otherwise it's Shanahan. This jane is liable to croak on us while we're marking time."

Hastily Chutney crossed to the telephone and took down its receiver. Presently he was put through. "Urgent, Larson! Matter of life and death, maybe. Yes, number sixteen; one floor up. I'll be right here. Ten minutes? Make it five, if you can! 'By."

"We're lucky," he breathed. "He was just leaving—car at his door."

"Where do you get that 'we' stuff? I ain't the one outa luck!"

Even with his words a knock at the door announced the young bellman, who bore the hotel register. The detective seized it and riffled its grimy pages.

"Here you are," he announced. "Ever see that before?"

He thrust the book under the other's nose.

"I've seen part of it, but I never wrote 'and wife.' That's been added!"

"You don't tell me, now! And by who? Sure you didn't write it absent-minded like? Here's you, in a swell room and bath, entered as John Smith and wife; and here's a woman on yer bed full o' hop, beefing about John breakin' her heart; and you all packed up and hat on ready to kiss the joint good-by when I happen along. Looks bad, if any one should ask me!"

Chutney frowned impatiently, and turned again to the bed. The girl—about twenty he judged her to be, slender of figure and lovely of face framed in a tangle of dark brown hair, not bobbed—seemed to have sunk into a sort of lethargy. She no longer babbled; but through half-parted lips came a stertorous breathing which grew harsher moment by moment.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" he asked. "Mr.—"

"Mr. Farrell," the big man admitted. "I don't know nothing we can do but wait for the doc! Opium ain't like other poisons. They don't pass out quick under it. I'll open all the windows and give her what free air there is, and you go telephone the office to have a waiter rush up a big pot of strong black coffee. If your doctor knows his business that's the first thing he'll ask for!"

While Chutney did this Farrell threw open the windows, and then awkwardly eased the girl into a more comfortable posture.

"Of course yer name ain't Smith?" he stated rather than asked. "Ya better come clean with me. I'm a sworn officer of the law, and I got my house to protect. It's a rotten mess all round, if things break wrong."

"No, my name isn't Smith," admitted Chutney.

Even as he spoke there came a smart,

authoritative knock on the door, which instantly opened to admit a keen, middle-aged man with clean shaven face. He bore a worn leather case, and he was stamped M. D. in every feature and gesture.

With a mere flicker of the eye at Farrell, and the briefest of nods to Chutney, whose intimate friend and adviser he had been for years, he strode swiftly to the bed and bent over the sleeping girl. He felt her pulse, lifted an eyelid and peered within, turned to ask a question, and found Farrell at his elbow, the paper box extended toward him.

"I see. Morphia. H-m. How long ago?"

Chutney answered. "I left the room an hour since, and when I came back she was here."

"Who is she? Why did she do it?"

Chutney shook his head. "I never saw her before in my life. I occupied this room alone last night, rose early, and went out for breakfast. Came back to get a paper—that picture there, on the chair. Left my door open, and she must have come in during my absence."

"Well, no telling how much she's taken. Don't have any of the marks of an addict. Main thing is to wake her up, and keep her awake. Ring for strong black coffee, will you?"

"I done so," said Farrell. "It oughta be here now."

Larson took from his case a long, slender rubber tube. After it had served its purpose he sought, by slapping the girl's cheeks and uncorking a phial of ammonia under her nose, coupled with sharp commands, to rouse her from her stupor.

When the coffee arrived he managed, with considerable difficulty, to get nearly a cupful down her throat. Her eyes opened haggardly, but with no gleam of comprehension. Larson turned and spoke over his shoulder.

"Give me a hand, one of you two, and I'll take her to my office. Don't want to enter her in a hospital if I can avoid it. You better come along with me." He spoke to Chutney, but without calling him by name.

But Farrell scowled and offered an objection. "Nothin' doing! I got my duty to the house to remember. Here's this bird who registers as John Smith, and who admits he ain't. That means whatever else he's done, he's vi'lated the true-name law of Massachusetts. Then there's this here 'and wife' thing to be cleared up. If the girl don't belong to him who is she, and how comes she in his bed?"

"Listen," said Chutney. "Get the clerk who saw me register last night. He'll swear as to the signature, and that I came alone."

"Sure; they all come in alone," sneered the detective. "That's old stuff! And as for the clerk, he went off duty at six this morning, and what's more, he started on his two weeks' vacation. And the day clerk knows nothing but what his register tells him."

"Here's my card, Farrell. I'm not trying to hide anything. At a more suitable time I'll explain why I registered under an assumed name."

Farrell took his card greedily, but ungraciously.

"May have to explain that to the judge," he grumbled. Then, as his eyes made out the lettering: "Chee! The man who controls all them table sauces! We've got 'em in our dining room right now." A reluctant affability crept into his manner.

"Another thing, my man," said Larson, who was getting impatient at the delay. "You may be—probably are—a duly qualified officer; but don't forget that I myself am an assistant medical examiner for this district, and don't need your permission to remove this young woman. I've performed autopsies on handsomer men than you!"

Farrell surrendered. Indeed, it was he who assisted the physician to carry the half conscious girl down a service staircase, and who held her in his arms while Larson brought his car around to the rear. He leaned forward for a final word with Chutney as the doctor meshed his gears.

"It's gonna take some doing to keep this quiet, mister! Get me? You can count on me—but you gotta coöperate! You call me up and make a date for us to have a heart-to-heart. How about it?"

"All right," snapped Chutney. "I'll keep in touch with you. I'm not running away!"

Farrell watched the big car glide smoothly down the street on its way to the Back Bay.

"You can bet your sweet life you're not running away, Mr. Chutney, *alias* Smith *and* wife! Not from old Bill Farrell!"

IV.

ARRIVED at Larson's Marlboro Street office, the physician turned briskly to Chutney.

"I don't mind saying that I stretched the truth a wee bit back there with Farrell. But as I see it, we want to keep this thing out of the papers if possible; and that hotel dick is the stuff blackmailers are made of. Now I've got to make some urgent calls. Mrs. Larson's here, and she is a graduate nurse. Knows more than half the medicos I consult with."

He turned to the girl, who was slumped listlessly in the chair where they had parked her. The pupils of her eyes had widened from pin-point to nearly normal size; her mouth drooped pathetically and her hands rested, palms upward, on her lap.

"What you've got to do for the next hour or two is to keep this young lady awake. Walk her up and down the room. She'll pull the heart out of you begging to be allowed to go to sleep; but if she does she may never wake up! I don't envy you; to the natural woman's wiles she looks as if she possessed in full measure, will be added the cunning inspired by a drug. Treat her rough—unless you want a dead body to be explained away! I'll ring for Mrs. Larson."

His call brought a pleasant faced woman with a look of efficiency inherited from early hospital regime. "Coffee, my dear. And keep an eye on this young couple and see that they *keep walking*—will you? Girl is emerging from an overdose of morphia. You have the list of my calls; give me a ring if anything unforeseen comes up. Good-by!"

Larson was gone, and Chutney found himself looking with some embarrassment into the clear eyes of a woman he had known socially for years. Was there a faintly ironic light in them?

He crushed the temptation to babble explanations, and turned to the girl, whose head was nodding and whose deep blue eyes were closing like fringed gentians. Awkwardly he put his arms beneath her shoulders and lifted her to her feet.

Her eyes remained closed, but her lips parted. "I—I'm so sleepy—" she breathed.

Mrs. Larson watched him, a half smile playing over her capable face. When he had got the girl—she seemed surprisingly heavy for so slender a figure—set upon feet that were like wooden props, the other woman silently vanished to prepare coffee.

Then began an experience the Condiment King was never to forget. The limp inertia of his charge compelled him to support her almost bodily. Her feet dragged on the oiled floor of the big office, her head sagged against his shoulder, and a noise too ladylike to be termed a snore, yet unmistakable evidence that the girl was dead on her feet, warned him that he was practically carrying her in his arms, and that she would probably sleep as soundly as if left in her chair.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, he could not ignore her appeal. The waist his left arm encircled was slender, yet firm as the bole of a young birch. Under her sheer dress the supple roundness of her breasts rose and fell in long, slow suspurations. She could not, he thought, be more than nineteen or twenty; in the relaxation of sleep no lines marred a face at once child-like yet full of character.

Her hair had come loose, and fell in a red-gold cascade over his sleeve; her lashes were extraordinarily long, and there was a humorous upward slant to her eyebrows. He knew little about women's clothes, but instinct told him she was clad in a sort of expensive simplicity; was turned out in a way that indicated a background in which such resorts as the Aroostook, and such acts as attempted suicide, did not figure.

The quiet words of Mrs. Larson snapped him out of his train of thought.

"Let's see if she can be made to swallow some more coffee. And then, it would be better if you force her to collaborate a little more in your stroll!"

Chutney blushed hotly. Between them,

and mostly by Mrs. Larson's quiet adroitness, they managed to get most of the black coffee down the patient's throat.

"And now for the walking! *Open your eyes!*" The last words were almost barked, and sounded absurdly like a sergeant of infantry. Mrs. Larson supplemented them by slapping the girl's cheeks, shaking her roughly, and rousing in Chutney's heart an indignation he was too wise to voice.

Under her urgency the girl's eyes opened languidly. She swept Chutney's face with a devastating smile, then snuggled closer against his shoulder. "Sleepy," she whispered. "Poor little me want to be carried!"

"Here! This will never do at all."

Mrs. Larson yanked the little head rudely up, gave Chutney an impatient push. "She'll vamp you if she can; are you going to be fool enough to let her? *Walk* her!"

So began the strangest walk the Condiment King had ever taken. Up and down, back and forth. To the window, right about face, and return past the flat-top desk to the surgical chair.

Under Mrs. Larson's instruction he held her upright, but not against his body. She showed him how to so balance her that instinct would cause her to use her own limbs to save a fall. And all the time she used against him every weapon in her feminine arsenal; and she had them all!

She wept, beseeched, upbraided. He was her only friend, her last refuge, a heartless monster, a murderer. She raised a hand to pat his cheek; she smiled, gnashed her teeth, moaned heartbreakingly, seemed on the point of collapsing. But he never faltered.

And presently her protests ceased. She was walking now, with only the slightest guidance; a rare, long drawn sigh her only plaint. Mrs. Larson nodded, and left the room.

History has shown that man has fallen in love under every conceivable condition, and with no regard for time or place. In a creaking tumbril on the way to the guillotine; working side by side at a bench in a sausage factory; immersed in salt water off a bathing resort; while playing a tournament match at golf or tennis; in the semi-dusk of a moving picture house; at picnics, funerals, prayer meetings.

Manifestly, a mighty army of lovers can date their surrender to a long walk together. Still, it is doubtful if many have been stricken under the circumstances in which Chutney found himself, forcibly escorting a strange young woman, stupefied by drugs, up and down a severely practical consultation room.

But though he had philandered with a number of attractive girls, and furthermore regarded himself as being as good as engaged to a charming lady of riper years, he knew by the tenth time they had promenaded past Larson's bookcase that he was mortally stricken.

True, he could hardly look to have his feelings reciprocated; could only hope for a more favorable occasion in the near future. And to all the youth and helplessness and charm of his fellow pedestrian was added the final touch of mystery; a sense that he had known her well in the past. Yet reason told him that never, until this day, had he set eyes upon her.

The brisk voice of Larson at his back caused him to wheel about. The girl turned stumblingly with him; but she was fully awake now, her eyes clouded with a faint film of fatigue.

Larson studied her approvingly, then took her arm and seated her in the big chair at his desk. Gesturing to another for Chutney, he sat down.

"Well, young woman! What have you to say for yourself?"

The girl's troubled gaze lingered on his face but an instant before fixing upon Chutney's sympathetic one.

"Why, I'm sorry, Mr. Chutney! I never—"

"*Hah!* You know his name? Did you know it when you went up to his room?"

The film of fatigue melted from her eyes. "That is not true! I didn't even know he was registered at—"

"What's your name, by the way?" Larson interrupted, poising a pencil over his desk pad.

Blue eyes narrowed again. "I—unless it is necessary, I'd rather not tell you that. Let me explain in my own way just what

happened; perhaps that will be enough, without my name."

She hesitated a moment, her hand playing nervously with a jade bracelet. "I was jealous," she shyly admitted.

"Not over me!" Surprise squeezed the words from Chutney's lips.

Blue eyes surveyed him as if he were one of the least of the onions used in his own relish. "Certainly *not*. Over the man I am—was—the man to whom I was as good as engaged. His name doesn't matter, either. We'd only known one another a few weeks—but he had been so kind and thoughtful. Then, too, he sort of swept me off my feet. I'd never met any one quite like him. Full of queer, funny quirks and notions. Always joking—like a boy. He kept me laughing all the time; and there hadn't been many laughs in my life! Things had been pretty discouraging; he was like—like sunshine after rain."

She had been looking at Chutney; but now she turned to the physician.

"I suppose you're a doctor, and that I was brought here to your office? And of course you have a right to know why I took—why I did such a foolish thing. I don't know as I *can* explain. It seems incredible to me now. But as I said, we—this man who had been so good to me—and I, were as good as engaged. He hadn't asked me in so many words, but I knew he was going to. And I wondered why he kept putting it off. He—you see, I gave him opportunities."

A delicate color flooded her face and neck, and again her eyes lowered. To neither listener did her attitude seem artificial.

"I brooded over it, as girls do. I think now it was wounded vanity more than jealousy; but anyhow, I got it into my head that there was some one else—another woman. An entanglement, perhaps; someone he must get rid of before committing himself to me. And, of course, it might be that he was only amusing himself with me, while all the time he was in love with some one else! Anyhow, I let myself get morbid about it.

"Without any real reasons, I convinced myself that he was being disloyal to me. And last night, when he told me he was leaving on a long trip, I—it seemed all the time as if something kept whispering: '*he's lying to you—making a fool of you!*' He seemed abstracted — inattentive. Not a bit like a man saying good-by for a long time, and hating to leave me behind.

"The feeling was so strong that I followed him." Again the lowered eyes, the flood of color. "If I'd had even five minutes to think I'd never have done so ignoble a thing; but I just threw on a hat; there was no time to lose if he was not to get out of sight, and he was just turning the corner when I came out of the door. He did not take a cab, and it was easy to keep him in sight. He went toward the North Terminal, just as he had told me, when suddenly he turned in at a place I never even had heard of before. It was a frowzy old hotel; and I stood out on the sidewalk for two or three minutes, uncertain what to do.

"Finally I went in, too, and found my way to the office; and there he stood at the desk, registering! All my old suspicions rushed back, redoubled. I waited until he left the desk and disappeared in the back of the lobby, and then went up to see what he had written. And it wasn't his name at all, but *John Smith and Wife*. I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the cry that seemed to come of itself. Fortunately the clerk had gone back to his chair, and didn't see me. Nobody was about. So I just made a note of the room number, and left the hotel."

Chutney leaned forward. "Are you *sure*," he asked, "that you saw him make that entry?"

The girl regarded him with faint surprise.

"Sure? Of course! Haven't I said that I went up as soon as he had left, and looked, and that nobody else was in the lobby? And *the ink was still wet*."

"And then?" prompted Dr. Larson.

"Well, I must have had a sort of brainstorm. Hurt pride, confirmed suspicions, hatred of him, and—and the other woman, an intense desire to *hurt* them without caring what happened to me—oh, it was terrible!

"I don't in the least remember going home, and by and by I found myself there;

and I undressed and got into bed. But I couldn't sleep; my mind kept devising ways of punishing him—both of them. Finally, toward morning, I thought of a way.

"I had a box of morphine pills; had had it for years. My mother was an addict; I was the only one who knew her secret; I had foolishly taken these away from her. Foolishly, because it only made her furiously angry with me, and, of course, she at once got more. I don't know why I hadn't destroyed them; it wasn't that I'd dreamed I'd ever use any myself. I hated them for what they had done to her!

"But anyhow, they came to my mind now; and I thought if I went to that place, the Aroostook, and to their room in the morning while they were still—before they were up—and burst in and confronted them and said a few things I'd had time to think up, and then ended by swallowing enough morphine to kill myself, it would mean exposure and disgrace and remorse for him; and as for me, I was just too mad to care!"

"Still," Larson reminded her as she paused, "when you did go up to the room you found nobody there!"

She nodded viciously. "Yes, I got there too late. Early as it was, they had left the hotel! But I took the morphine just the same."

"Then you couldn't be sure they ever occupied the room at all! I understand 'John Smith' wasn't your—er—friend's name?"

"Of course it wasn't; he wouldn't under the circumstances be crazy enough to register with—to write down his real name. But he might have had a little more imagination than to choose such a silly one as he did. Anyhow, I knew he'd occupied the room. You see, he writes advertising; and on a chair I found his latest design, just where he had forgotten it; one he was very proud of, and had told me about, never dreaming it would condemn him!"

"By golly—*John Clabby!*" cried Chutney, his eyes popping with surprise.

The girl turned her own to him with an amazement as great.

"I occupied that room alone, last night," he explained. "It was I who had Clabby's layout, and left it on a chair. It was to get it that I had come back to the room when I found you! But I registered, for purposes I needn't go into now, as plain John Smith; and you have saved me from softening of the brain by showing how 'and wife' came to be tagged to that. That's Jack Clabby's work; he must have been in the lobby and seen me register, and it's like his idiotic sense of humor to add those high-voltage words, hoping some investigation or other would be started by the clerk to put me in a hole; and never dreaming I'd ever suspect who did it to me! Which I wouldn't, but for you!"

Larson chuckled.

"Well, that's that. And now, my patient mustn't talk any more. Chutney, you run along. I'm going to keep this young lady here under observation until tomorrow. I want to be sure she doesn't have another attack of temperament! I think, after you have gone, she will be willing to confide her name and address to me."

The girl smiled faintly. "Yes, sir; I don't mind, after he has gone."

The Condiment King rose and bowed stiffly. "You have the advantage; but, of course, if you wish to be furtive about yourself—"

The blue eyes swept him lazily. A suggestion of a dimple showed at one corner of her full lips.

"There's a reason, Mr.—Smith," she said demurely.

V.

One reason why Clarence Chutney had been crowned as the Condiment King was that in a showdown he never permited pleasure to run away with his business deals.

As he left Dr. Larson's office his head was singing with the intoxication of youth in distress, and himself in the rôle of cavalier. He could still feel the pressure of a little head nestling against his shoulder, and his arm was warm from sheltering the supple waist of the girl who had so strangely come into his life.

But even as his heart quickened at the thought of an early return to see how she was getting on, his head concerned itself

with the business that had brought him to Boston.

The clock on the Arlington Street church showed ten as he entered the public gardens; Caine-Sturges would have tubbed and breakfasted, and should be in an enviable mood to discuss terms.

He crossed Charles Street and struck diagonally through the Common, toward the Tureen Hotel. Ten minutes later he had sent up his card, and been requested to come right up to the Englishman's suite.

Caine-Sturges had but just breakfasted in his sitting room, and was brilliantly clad in a Turkish dressing gown over his pyjamas. He was an incredibly tall, bony man, with fair skin and straw colored hair and a tiny mustache. Chutney was conscious of a faint disappointment that he did not have a monocle screwed to one of his pale blue, slightly popping eyes.

"Awfully good of you to come," he murmured as his visitor entered. "Sorry I can't offer you a spot—your own national fault, what?"

Chutney offered his hand, and was surprised to have it ground relentlessly in languid looking fingers. He accepted a chair and a Piccadilly cigarette.

"Hope I didn't tear you away from anything important? Understand your place is near by; in the next county—state I should say, shouldn't I?"

Chutney explained that it was only about as far as from the Scottish Highlands to London, which seemed to bewilder his host.

"Not really? Frightfully sorry! Fancied it was only a few miles. Hope I can make you see that the matter is rather vital—to me, at any rate."

The words cheered the Condiment King. If Caine-Sturges was so anxious to sell, it would be easy to come to terms.

"I was glad to hear from you, and to break away from a rather tiresome house party," he lied easily. "I was going to suggest that you run back with me. There's no shooting at this time of year, but the fishing is capital, and I've a very fair golf course and good clay tennis courts. And there is a little pre-war liquor left in my cellar, too."

"Awfully decent of you," murmured Caine-Sturges. "But fact is, I'm booked to return on Wednesday week. That's my sole excuse for dragging you down here. Business before pleasure, as you Americans say—what?"

"Business it is, then," agreed Chutney. "Well, I don't mind admitting that I've wanted Gloucestershire Sauce for a long time. I've even figured out about what I consider a fair offer for it. And so, I dare say, have you. The next step would seem to be to find out how far apart we stand.

He became aware of a bewildered look in the pale blue orbs of the Englishman, a look as if he didn't quite know what it was all about. "Haven't I made myself clear?" he added.

"But, my dear chap! I haven't an idea of disposing of Gloucestershire Sauce! It's been in our family for a long time. Matter of two hundred years, I'd say offhand. Sorry; but I couldn't consider letting it go."

It was Chutney's turn to be surprised. His jaws dropped, and he leaned forward in his chair. "But—I don't understand! What else could you want to see me about, then?"

"I was about to explain, Chutney. It's a—er—personal matter, you know. Concerns my niece."

"Your niece!" gasped Chutney, who didn't know he had one. "But how on earth—"

Caine-Sturges waved an apologetic hand.

"I know it sounds a bit thick, but let me explain. You see, I'm not married. Haven't a living relative save this niece, my eldest brother's child. And she's somewhere in America. Large order—what? Teddy, my brother, had a gypsy streak in him. No end clever; music, art, all that sort of thing. Didn't hit it off with the governor at all. Finally ran away with a stock company—he could act a bit among other accomplishments—and while on tour met and married an actress much older than himself. Countrywoman of yours, by the way. She led him a dog's life; kept him in debt up to his ears, always nagging at him, and, as he found out too late, she was addicted to drugs. Clever woman, good looker, too; but hard as flint. Killed poor old Teddy, if you should ask me!

"We had quite lost touch with them, and in fact only learned of Teddy's death when his widow wrote the governor trying to wheedle or coerce him into making a settlement. They had a child—a little girl. We offered to take her, but the governor wouldn't give a stiver to the woman. She on her part wouldn't give up the child; and they disappeared. She must be of age now; and when my father died I realized that she was all the flesh and blood I had left. So I set inquiries afoot. I knew that the mother, a Mrs. Peverill—"

"*Who?*" exploded Chutney, in whose heart a wild suspicion had been stirring.

Caine-Sturges blinked mildly.

"Natalie Peverill is her name. Poor old Teddy took our mother's name when he became a Thespian, of sorts. That, and the probable fact that she was somewhere in the States, was all I had to start on. My solicitor engaged a New York agency to trace her. Their operative finally run the old girl to earth, and had an interview with her.

"She had quarreled with Ardeen, my niece, after trying to marry the poor child off to two or three wealthy rotters, and the girl had cleared out. Had a spirit of her own; takes after poor old Teddy, I'd say. Anyhow, Ardeen had run away and it was rumored that she'd gone into musical comedy somewhere. Rather a day's work to find her; Mrs. Peverill denied any knowledge of her whereabouts, and had never told her that her father's family was anxious to look after her.

"The Peverill woman was living a bit mysteriously; sort of an adventuress, or at least a hanger-on to your upper middle class set, so my agents reported. And there the matter rested until the other day, when I received a warm tip that Ardeen was here in Boston. She hadn't been having too much luck, had failed on the stage and in the cinema, and after thumping the piano here and there in music halls and so forth, had secured a clerical position.

"Here's where you come in, Chutney. It seems that she got employment in your offices; which is why I ventured to impose on your good nature. I at once crossed over, but when I found that you employ several hundred young women, I was a bit stumped. I did, of course, check up on her name; found there was no Peverill working in your place. Evidently the girl had changed her name; quite likely she did this when she planned to go on the stage. They all do that. And obviously I couldn't barge into your shop looking for her; as a business rival, so to speak, my motives would be misconstrued. Think I was trying to steal your formula—what? And so the best bet seemed to be to send for you, and ask your help."

"But how can I help? I never saw the girl, and you say she isn't using her own name.

Caine-Sturges smiled.

"Ah, but you see, I have a photograph of her! The New York agency managed to filch one rather cleverly from the Peverill woman's apartment. And I thought you could show this to one of your department heads, or the chappie who hires your typists and what not, and find out in this way if Ardeen is there. Would it be too much trouble?"

"N-not at all!" murmured Chutney, rather dazed at Caine-Sturges's story, and still more so at the unfavorable light in which it depicted the woman he had, twenty-four hours ago, fully intended to marry. He was surprised to find that there was in his heart no resentment at the Englishman's rather harsh picture of Natalie Peverill.

He absent-mindedly took the cabinet size photograph the other was handing him.

If the girl, whatever her name, was working in his offices, a thing strange enough in itself, it should be an easy matter to find her.

He had probably seen her, though he seldom gave more than a casual glance at any of the young women there, aside from his own private stenographer. He glanced curiously at the likeness of Natalie's child; she had left her mother before he came to know her.

Only by a painful effort of self-restraint did he manage to choke back the cry that beat at his lips. For—the wide, candid eyes that looked up at him from the ex-

cellent photographic likeness were those of the mysterious girl he had but half an hour before left in Dr. Larson's Back Bay office!

VI.

THREE days later Chutney, still lingering on in a very sultry Boston, but now properly registered at the Tureen Hotel, received a soiled card, whose cheaply printed lettering read:

WILLIAM FARRELL
Confidential Investigations

His mind, populated with more agreeable citizens, he could not for a moment place Farrell. Then suddenly he visualized a thick, frowzy figure in wrinkled blue serge, framed in the doorway of the Aroostook's bridal chamber.

He frowned; it occurred to him that he should before this have looked the man up and got rid of him. But he had been occupied with much pleasanter things.

"Show him up," he decided; and presently the house detective, wearing what seemed to be the same collar and shirt in which Chutney had first seen him, and the same wrinkled blue suit, was ushered in.

"Sit down," commanded Chutney. "Have a cigar. Forgot all about you! What's on your mind, if anything?"

Farrell waited until he had lighted his cigar before speaking. His half-closed eyes regarded Chutney with a veiled leer.

"Yeah, I know you're a busy man, Mr. Smith—I mean Chutney! But so am I. I look easy going, but manage to get around fairly spry. Covered quite a lot of ground since we met while you was a guest of our house."

"Yes?" Chutney prompted, impatiently. "I'm not especially interested in the spryness with which you get around, you know. Suppose you tell me your story."

Farrell smoked with relish, his eyes never leaving Chutney's.

"But that *is* the story, mister! I been sort of keeping tabs on you the past two, three days."

"What for?"

"What for?" The detective spoke almost reproachfully. "Why, Mr. Chutney, the Aroostook hires me to protect its good name. We got to look after our interests. We don't have the drag the Tureen has; police are always nagging us. Our location puts us at the mercy of all sorts of dubious characters and fly-by-nights. We do the best we can to live up to the law, but these birds will fly into our place every now and then. It's up to me to keep an eye on 'em. Look at things reasonable, sir!

"You register at our hotel as *John Smith and Wife*. Yes—I know you don't admit the 'and Wife' part; but take it from me, you'd be laughed out of court—if not into jail—if you tried to spring that story to the judge! Anyhow, you broke the true-name law, and that means a fine of a hundred fish as a minimum, and mebbe thirty days besides, if circumstances is suspicious."

He raised a hairy hand to check the retort that rose to the other's lips.

"And I'll tell the wall-eyed world they *are* suspicious, mister! I catch you in your room all packed up to skip, and a drugged girl on your bed, which you swears you never clapped eyes onto before. And I'm enough of a good thing to let you get your own doctor, and the two of you carry her off—remove the evidence, as you might say. All on your promise to keep in touch with me. 'Stead of which, you gimme the slip and come over to this swell dump and register under your own name! Or, at least, you prob'ly *thought* you'd gimme the slip."

Chutney frowned. "I thought nothing about it, Farrell! Fact is, I haven't thought of you once since. I did intend to look you up."

Farrell nodded gloomily. "Good intentions paves hell, so I've heard. Look here, Mr. Chutney; want me to tell you what I've found out about you?"

"I don't care a hang what you've found out! There's nothing I'm ashamed of."

"Well, I'm no judge of how much it takes to make you ashamed. But here's my dope; all dug up by me, old Bill Farrell. The girl is fixed up all right by Larson.

All right; and who is she? Why, a stenog *in your own office!* Been workin' there more'n a year; and you got the nerve to tell me you never seen her till that day in the Aroostook! And you been seein' her pretty regular ever since, too.

"Last night, a show followed by dinner on the Eastminster Roof. All afternoon, out in a swell roadster. Night before that, dinner here with a tall, skinny limey. I ain't got his number, yet. He and you and her was out all that day in your roadster again; I dunno where, and it don't matter. What I'm tellin' you is, you tried to double cross me! You knew this jane—your own stenog—and she come to the Aroostook as *Mrs. Smith.* I ain't sayin' she spent the night there. But she and you had a row, and she tried to commit suicide, and now she and you has made it up together again, and what I want to know is, *where do I get off at?*"

Chutney shrugged wearily.

"I don't propose to take the trouble to tell you the story, Farrell, except to say that it is a fact that I registered at your hotel as plain John Smith. The rest was added by John Clabby, whom you may or may not know. I have witnesses to this act of his."

A surprised look in Farrell's eyes betrayed the fact that Clabby was not unknown to him.

"The girl does work for me, and so do over two hundred others. I never saw her, to my knowledge, until that morning. But since then, and having helped save her life, and heard and verified her story, I have asked her to be my wife. The tall man you have seen with us is her uncle, an Englishman, who thoroughly approves of the match. And as for you," Chutney paused reflectively and bit the end from a fresh cigar, "*you can go to hell!*"

Whatever may be said of Farrell, it could not be denied that he did possess some knowledge of human nature, usually colored by a tendency to believe the worst of everybody. In his heart, he knew that Chutney was telling the truth, even though much he would like to know had been left unexplained.

He cleared his throat portentously, squared his massive shoulders to save what he could from the situation.

"All right, Mr. Chutney; have it your own way! I'm not calling you a liar. But be reasonable! If certain facts that even you don't dispute gets about, it won't do you nor the young woman no good a-tall. To say nothing of me losing my job."

"Why should these facts get about, if you hold your tongue? What are you hinting at—blackmail? I'll save your time by telling you nobody will ever get a nickel from Clarence Chutney that way!"

Bill Farrell rolled up his eyes, shocked.

"Why, *Mr. Chutney!* To speak such a word to me, with twenty-five years honorable record behind me and a wife and four children to support—"

"Well—what *do* you mean, then?"

"It's this way, sir. If, as you says, it's only a question of me keeping my trap closed—and nobody can do it better—everything would be jake. But there's other's got their suspicions. The bell-hop and chambermaid and a porter that seen us lug the kid off and the day clerk—you know, servants of the Aroostook that each has seen something, and gets to comparin' what they knows, and one thing and another. Sooner or later, the story leaks outside, and a nosy reporter gets word of it, and then, *it's all off!*"

"I see," Chutney agreed. "The idea being that a little money, discreetly spread in the right quarters, would cause these employees to forget everything. Distributed, let us say, by some intelligent person like yourself?"

"That would be the best way, sir," Farrell cordially admitted. "That would plug every leak."

Chutney drew from his pockets a folding check book and a fountain pen. He filled out a check, and handed it over. "I've made it to cash, and for five hundred dollars," he said. "And you'll never get another cent from me, if you live to be a hundred! No matter what happens."

"Fine!" cried Farrell, his fat face breaking out into a maze of joyous creases. "Enough—and to spare, sir. That will buy a silence that 'll make a graveyard sound like a world's series' grandstand!"

Chutney rose as a hint that the interview was over. At the door, Farrell hesitated.

"If y'ever need any investigatin' done secretlike, Mr. Chutney, remember Bill Farrell! And one other thing: I want to say the missus is never without a bottle of your Onion Relish on the table. I might say all our young ones was raised on it."

"You shall have a case of it next Christmas," Chutney promised. "Just scribble your home address on your card."

"And that's that," he said to himself as he closed the door. "It was coming to me for making such a fool break. He might have held me up for a lot more than that John Smith stuff!"

VII.

THREE days later a little group lingered on the deck of the Mastodon, which was about to clear from its East Boston dock for Liverpool. A bit apart, a tall bony Englishman stood smoking a Piccadilly cigarette, and watching with paternal indulgence while the Condiment King took into his arms the lovely young girl as a steward cried: "All ashore that's going!"

"It won't be for long, my dear!" she whispered. "Only December. It will be wonderful to be married in the old parish church where so many of dear father's ancestors have been christened and married and everything!"

Chutney kissed her for the twentieth time. "No regrets for—for John Clabby?"

Ardeen wrinkled her nose. "Poor Jack! And to think I imagined I cared enough for him to swallow a morphine pill. Why—I don't believe I could bring myself to swallow an ice cream soda to his memory! Still, I'm grateful to him in a way—he brought us together, you know!"

Caines-Sturges drew near. "Overboard you go, Chutney, or else remain as a fellow-passenger!"

The gangplank was being slowly drawn ashore. Just as Chutney set reluctant feet upon it, Caines-Sturges leaned over for a final word: "By the way, old chap! Ardeen gets all right and title to Gloucestershire Sauce the day she is married."

When he had watched the great vessel until it disappeared down the main ship channel, Chutney drew from a pocket a telegram. It was from Ebb Tide, the fourth he had received that week. He read it once more:

> Miss you so and worry about you this hot weather. Hope trip successful. Come back soon.

At the first telegraph office, he wired a reply:

> Coming to-night. Will have lots to tell you. You'll be surprised.

And so insidious is a bad habit, that he absent-mindedly signed it John Smith.

THE END

APRIL

THE snows that winter brought—
The blasts that made our bodies shiver—
Are gone; a miracle is wrought;
You sense the universal quiver.

The sap is rising in the trees—
Within your bones you know, you feel it.
You want to scamper with the breeze;
You're more alive and can't conceal it.

It's April, April, and that you know—
Your singing soul tells you for certain.
You see the world anew as though
Dame Nature had just raised a curtain.

George Lawrence Andrews.

West of Broadway

A STORY OF THE THEATER

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Gleaming Blade," "The Mad Movie," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

BEN LUDLOW, having inherited eighteen thousand dollars and a talent for the stage, moves into a theatrical rooming house with the intention of writing a play. He becomes acquainted with June Jesson, who impresses him as being an honest girl, although she poses, scantily clad, in a Summer Garden stage spectacle. It becomes necessary for June's younger sister, Sally, to come to New York from her small town home and make a living, and June is terrorized over the thought that the exact nature of her stage part may become known to the young and innocent Sally. In the latter's interest she pledges Ben to protect Sally from various snares of the city and represent that she, June, is playing on the road. Ben is to keep Sally from any possible chance of visiting the Summer Garden. He meets Sally as a matter of course, and falls in love with her. She inspires him to write a play. Meanwhile she herself, who has proved far more sophisticated in many ways than the man who volunteered to protect her, meets a fly-by-night manager, Humbolt Green, who, making Sally an unconscious confederate, perfects a scheme to bilk Ben out of a large part of his inheritance. He does this by accepting Ben's drama, playing on the young man's ambitions and pardonable vanity. Ben, believing that Green is putting up a like amount, advances ten thousand dollars toward the production. June tells Ben that he has been too gullible.

CHAPTER XVIII (*Continued*).

BEN GETS SOME INFORMATION.

"IT'S about time that we had a financial accounting," he said, firmly, and waited for Humbolt to quail. But Green did not quail. He looked squarely back at Ben and said heartily:

"It certainly is. You've been so busy with the show that I didn't want to interrupt you, but I can fix things up in ten minutes."

"Oh, can you?" asked the author, a bit abashed.

"Certainly. Now these books are the books of the corporation. Here is our

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for March 27.

charter and articles. I'll call my secretary in and we'll hold our first meeting. We'll make her secretary of the company. You are the president and I am the treasurer. We three are the board of directors. Here are the stock certificates, which you have to sign as president and which are divided. The company is incorporated at twenty thousand dollars paid in capital. You receive fifty shares out of a hundred and I receive fifty."

"I don't know anything about corporations," Ben admitted, in confusion.

"You don't have to. Just simple legal formalities. Now, here is the seal of the corporation. See, you stamp the certificates like this, and you also sign this application to deposit our bank account with the Grand National Bank. Then you affix the seal."

Much interested, Ben followed instructions. The seal of the Green-Ludlow Corporation looked very imposing; his doubts of Green's financial responsibility were fast fading; everything seemed open and above board.

"All right," said Green. "Now, here is a receipt from the Equity for one thousand, nine hundred and fifty dollars for two weeks' advance pay roll. Here is a receipt from Masterson for a week's salary of five hundred dollars, here are various small receipts for expenses which I paid out of my personal account pending turning over our capital to the corporation.

Ben glanced at the receipts which Green piled in front of him and then saw something which convinced him that Green was absolutely on the level. The producer drew forth a bank passbook made out to the Green-Ludlow Producing Corporation which showed that a deposit had been made the previous day for sixteen thousand dollars.

"The bank will not let us draw checks until they receive this statement from the corporation, but they accepted our money on deposit," Green explained.

"Seems to be O. K.," declared Ben. "Perfectly all right."

"Certainly. Now you be reading over the by-laws of the corporation while I call in Miss Manning and dictate the minutes of the first meeting."

Ben looked at the very legal and impressive set of by-laws. Being unfamiliar with legal verbiage, he did not make any more out of the by-laws than any other layman would have done, but they seemed to be devised to cover and protect the corporation in every possible way.

In two or three minutes Green took the book away from him and set the stock book in front of him. He drew several large government stamps from his drawer and pasted them on the stock certificates.

"Make out two certificates for fifty shares each and sign them," he instructed. "Then tear out one and put it in your pocket. That shows that you own fifty per cent of this company."

Ben folded the stiff green paper and put it in his breast pocket. Somehow it gave him a sense of happiness and well-being. After all, a man might be a contemptible scoundrel as regards women and be a model of rectitude in business. It was evident that Green had bent over backward to protect him, and June's notion that he proposed to steal Ben's money was quite absurd. All right, he would remain business friends with Green, but he would watch him like a hawk and make very sure that he took no liberties with Sally.

Humbolt Green completed his dictation, then slapped him soundly on the shoulder, his favorite mode of expressing good will and good fellowship.

"Now, old scout," he declared, "I hope you are satisfied. The way I am is like this. I don't want to take any advantage of anybody. You can come in here at any time and look over the books, in fact, it's your duty as president of the company.

"Do you want to countersign the checks? I can have the by-laws changed so both of us will have to sign every check, but you may be on the road with the troupe or busy at rehearsal and that will be inconvenient because I must be out buying scenery and props."

"I'm satisfied," said Ben. "If I can inspect the books at any time, there is no reason for me to countersign the checks."

"That's all right. I want you to be happy."

"Well," said Ben, "I won't be happy until we get this cast right."

"That's up to you and Masterson. The director ought to have the final say, but if he insists upon keeping anybody that you think is wrong, you just come to me, and I'll go with you and show him the light. We must be careful about Masterson. He's a valuable man."

"I am told that he is a bad director. They call him Last Hope Masterson."

"Do you know why? Do you know why? Because they call him in when other directors have muffed. He is the last hope for a show that is in trouble and many a show he has saved at the last moment. But I can understand that the nickname might have sounded unpleasant."

There was nothing more for Ben to say. He had come in for a financial accounting and he had been overwhelmed by the exactness with which Green had accounted. Green had promised every assistance with the cast, and, as regards Masterson, very likely June had been deceived in the meaning of the nickname.

June might even be wrong regarding the reason for Green's wishing her discharge. Perhaps he was superstitious about sisters in the same cast. When he departed, Ludlow had almost concluded that his jealousy had been without reason. Whatever might be the matter with Humbolt Green, he had a lot of personal magnetism and unlimited plausibility.

When the outer door closed on Ben Ludlow, Green heaved a sigh of profound relief. It had been a very anxious time, this last half hour. Everything was wrong, but everything had been made to appear all right.

His audacity had been tremendous, because he had flashed on Ben—as a receipt from the actor's society for two weeks' cash deposit for the salary of the performers in West of Broadway—the receipt for the salary and expenses owing his own Rosebud company of two months gone. Close scrutiny would have revealed this.

The display of a bank passbook showing a deposit of sixteen thousand dollars, was extremely simple. He had deposited six thousand dollars, and had deftly written in a figure one before the six, one of the oldest tricks in the world. He had counted upon Ben not taking the trouble to verify at the bank what it said on the passbook. So that was that.

Of course, trouble might be coming in a fortnight or so, but much could happen in a fortnight. Humbolt Green took care of himself day by day. Since he had received Ludlow's ten thousand dollars he had been living on the fat of the land, paid up what back bills forced themselves upon his attention, had even been Santa Claus to Gladys with two hundred dollars taken from Ben's inheritance.

Humbolt Green did not need any self-justification for his treatment of another man's money intrusted to him, because he believed in doing anything which he could get away with. He had figured it out that, with luck, he could bring the play into New York on six or seven thousand dollars instead of twenty thousand and, without luck, he would manage to escape prosecution by methods known to himself. For at least another week he felt sure he would not be annoyed by Ben Ludlow.

He was so completely at ease that he picked up a copy of "West of Broadway" which he had not yet found time to peruse, but after eight or ten pages he laid it down, growling: "Of all the damn hokum!"

CHAPTER XIX.

WANTED—LAUGHTER.

TO the person who doesn't know anything about the theater, an especial fascination hangs about rehearsals; some of the glamour of the footlights and the charm of the smoothly moving performance covers what is the dreariest and most monotonous business imaginable. Fortunate it is that most rehearsals are held behind closed doors; even the dress rehearsal is exhibited to a few select and usually sophisticated guests.

If the general public could see the preliminary rehearsals of any legitimate drama, its disillusionment would be as great as if it were led back-stage after a particularly eye-filling spectacular scene in a revue and

shown the drab and strictly utilitarian rear of it.

Ben Ludlow had attended his first rehearsal with all the anticipations and illusions of the ordinary individual. His enthusiasm had been dampened as completely as a Spanish lover, strumming beneath the window of his *inamorata,* who is suddenly doused with a bucket of dirty water.

Subsequent rehearsals completely removed from him all shreds of fascination which might have survived the sight of the frowzy and hopeless troupe assembled in the rat trap of a rehearsal hall.

True, Miss Bowser, the platter-faced heroine, vanished between the opening rehearsal and the second assembly, but in her place was a vapid, anæmic, unprepossessing and thoroughly frightened fledgling.

He had supposed that the company would have memorized their lines in time for the second rehearsal. Apparently, not one of them had opened a part book, for everybody stumbled and stuttered through the reading with no more interest or appreciation than before. Most of the time was occupied by Masterson and Ben in writing with dull pencils upon the parts, the changes in lines and cues evolved by the author as a result of working until four in the morning.

From a corner of his eye, Ben saw the objectionable leading man whispering in Sally's ear, which caused him to make errors in his copying that brought the wrath of the director down upon him.

Overnight, Masterson had accumulated more ideas for changes. During the lunch hour, he unloaded them upon Ben.

"You have got to fatten up the part of that old Irish landlady. She ought to be funny. Keep bringing her in. Get some laughs in your lines. And I've been thinking. She is behind in her rent, but you only bring the owner of the house in for a second in the first act. Now I got an idea. Make him a Jew, see. Make him old. Write in a lot of scenes for him and the old woman. They fall in love; in the last act we marry them off."

"But this is the love story of Evelyn and Henry," protested the playwright.

"Never mind Evelyn and Henry. You've got too much sloppy sentiment between them. I'm going to cut a lot of that junk out anyway, and you'll have room for some good comedy. Let her abuse the Jews, make him abuse the Irish, then show how they are falling in love. Great."

"Ha, ha," scoffed Guy Pilgrim, who was sitting in a corner eating a lunch he had brought in a paper parcel. "Original stuff. Give you credit. Did you ever see Abie's Irish Rose?"

"Mind your own business," snapped Masterson. "I'm going to cut the guts out of your part, young fellow; that makes you sore, don't it?"

"But look here," Ben protested. "Am I the author of this play, or am I not?"

"You are, but you are not. Once rehearsals start, you are about as important around here as the wart on the nose of that old character woman."

"I won't stand for your distorting and ruining my play."

"Bah!" scoffed Masterson, who, sitting before an open script, ran a blue pencil through a long speech, to emphasize his remark. "It was ruined, and I'm trying to put it together again. Nobody ever heard of you, but I got a reputation."

"Ha, ha," scoffed Pilgrim, taking a huge bite out of a sandwich.

"One more horse laugh out of you, and you go out of this cast. If it wasn't for me, you'd have been fired last night along with Lizzie Bowser, the Harrigan and Hart veteran. I don't know why I kept you. God knows you are rotten."

Pilgrim made no answer. Even Masterson did not know how desperate were his circumstances.

"We've got to fire the woman playing Mrs. Callahan, and we have to fire the old landlord," said Masterson. "With big comedy parts for them, I need a couple of good people. I'll pick up a pair that have a lot of gags that they can stick in."

"I'll have no vaudeville gags in my play," exclaimed Ben, red with anger.

"Another crack out of you, and I lock you out of rehearsals," shouted Masterson. "I can rewrite this play and I'll do it. Of all the terrible things to wish on a director is a first-play author. I bet you couldn't

write a comedy scene between an Irishwoman and a Jew."

"I wouldn't lower myself to such buffoonery, and I'll have you remember that, besides being author, I'm half owner of this production."

"Then you'll have to get another director, or butt out."

June Jesson and Sally had entered during the latter part of the argument, and June slipped over to tug at Ben's sleeve.

"Can I speak to you privately?" she demanded.

Willing enough to escape from the situation he had provoked, Ben nodded and walked aside with her.

"Take him out and soak his head in a bucket," called Masterson, with a wry grin at June. For some reason or other, the grouchy director had taken a liking to the little girl, perhaps because she struck him as a trouper and a competent performer.

"Listen, Ben," she said earnestly, when she had conducted him to a corner. "Don't row with Masterson. He's a bum, but he's been a good man, and he knows this business. If he quit this show you couldn't hire anybody half as competent. That's a fact."

"But he wants me to throw out some of my love scenes, and stick in a grotesque love affair between the old Irish landlady and the Jew that owns the house."

"It's a darn good idea," said June. "It will get laughs. If you get enough laughs your show is saved."

"But I don't want my show saved by imbecile laughter. I'd be ashamed to show my head. I couldn't permit my name to be associated with such a thing."

"What are you going to do if this show fails and you lose your ten thousand dollars?"

"I don't know," he said, drearily.

"What manager is going to buy a play from a fellow that had one flop to his credit?"

"I don't know."

"Then get wise. Do anything this old bird tells you. Say, I sneaked into your room yesterday afternoon and swiped the script. I knew you wouldn't mind. Honest, Ben, it hasn't got a chance unless you do a lot to it. You don't know what to do. This noisy tramp does. Play him, kid, play him. I can give you a lot of gags for the old woman. Didn't I troupe around in burlesque and musical comedy for four years? I know every wow in the business. Stick 'em all in."

"But this isn't a farce."

"Believe me it is, but you don't know it. Listen, is your play going to win the way it is?"

"I am afraid not."

"You know darn well it isn't. Well, don't put your name on it. Let old Masterson do anything he likes with it. Get your money back and then write a real play, produce it with a real company and become the William Shakespeare of Indiana."

"What are you two talking about?" demanded Sally, who had been unable to resist her curiosity and had followed them across the room.

"Ben was just telling me that you was the most beautiful blond baby doll that he ever seen in his life," said June, with a wink at Ben.

"Oh, were you, Ben?" Sally favored him with a killing smile and Ben curled up with delight the way a strip of bacon curls up on a hot fire. The conversation became a dialogue in which June had no part. So she strolled over and began to banter the lunch-carrying leading man.

The remainder of the outfit drifted in one by one, and Masterson, with patience, minus which a director would become insane, forced them to read the play a second time. The only approval evoked was given to Sally, who read a little speech of about twenty words with some approach to effectiveness.

"That's not so bad," he said. "You got your accent on the wrong word, and raise your voice at the end of the line."

Sally's eyes filled with tears. She supposed she was being rebuked and humiliated before the company. June pinched her.

"He's praising you, you goof," she whispered. "Do as he tells you."

At the end of the rehearsal, the hour being about four o'clock, Masterson dismissed school.

"To-morrow," he said, "I'm going to stick in some of the action. I want you people to get up a little in your parts, be able to read your lines as if they were in the English language, and keep your noses out of your books. You blond chicken, I want to see you for a minute."

Sally recognized the description and trotted over to the table.

"I'm thinking of making you understudy for the lead. Do you suppose you could learn the part?" He handed her the part book at which she looked disconsolately.

"Oh, I never could learn all that," she protested.

"Of course you can," declared June, who was at her elbow. "I'll see that she does it, Mr. Masterson."

"Beat the life out of her and make her learn it," advised the director. "Walk her off now, before I fall for a baby doll at my time of life."

Being firmly resolved to get rid of the two performers playing the landlady and the house owner before the next day, it was typical of the show business that he did not mention to them the fact that they were fired. In case the new actors did not turn up he would permit them to read the parts for a day or two longer. Why not, since he wasn't paying them anything?

June and Sally were waiting outside for Ben.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if he let Sally have the lead?" demanded June.

"That's absurd. She couldn't play it!"

"Why not? She looks the part, and you've written the lines exactly as she talks. It almost seems as if you had her in mind," said June with a twinkle in her eyes. Ben looked confused.

"Oh, Ben, wouldn't you like me to play it?" cooed Sally in her most babyish voice.

"Of course, Sally, of course."

"Sally couldn't act," explained June. "But all she would have to do would be to look pretty and be natural. She could play this part if she didn't get stage fright, and she's too dumb for that."

"June Jesson, I won't be insulted," declared Sally with red cheeks. "Ben Ludlow, are you going to stand there and let her insult me?"

"It's all talk. I bet you couldn't learn the part to save your life," June taunted her.

"I could, too. I'll show you if I can't."

"You'll have brain fever and land in a hospital," said the frank sister.

"I won't, either."

"On second thought, you couldn't."

"Couldn't what?"

"Have brain fever."

"That will do, June. I won't have Sally annoyed in this way."

"Excuse me for living, old man—" June choked herself off and blushed fiery red.

"What were you going to say?" asked Ben.

"Oh, just a gag that was too rough for 'Ladies of the Evening' last season. I'm kind of crude, Ben."

"You have a lot of common sense," he admitted. "But you are grossly unfair to Sally."

Sally, who had his arm, purred gratefully in his ear, and Ben began to walk on air.

At midnight, the young author was sitting before his table staring into vacancy. His notes were strewn around, the floor was covered with crumpled sheets of paper, his progress had been nil. It was thus that June found him when she slipped into the room without bothering to knock. She had a kimono over her nightdress and her face wore an expression of mischief.

"Darn it, June, you know better than to come here like this," he expostulated. "What will Sally think?"

June drew a package of cigarettes from the pocket of her kimono and defiantly lit one of them.

"The angel is sound asleep," she explained. "I've been holding the book on her all night, and, to my surprise, she is able to memorize. But the mental effort almost killed her. So I sneaked down here to see what luck you were having with the Callahan-Rosnosky love affair."

"None," he said gloomily. "I don't know how those people talk. I can't write dialect."

"You've heard Mrs. Callahan," she declared. "Every line that comes out of her mouth is a nifty. Just get some wise cracks

for the Jew, never mind writing dialect—any Jewish comedian will supply that."

"Well, I don't know where to begin."

"Begin at the beginning, where he sits in the parlor and tells her that he wants the rent. My Gawd, all you got to do is to rewrite the scene between *Shylock* and the debtor from 'The Merchant of Venice,' into Broadway chatter. Look:

"'The top of the mornin', Mr. Rosnosky; sure it's a terrible hard time I'm havin', a poor widow woman, tryin' to keep body and soul together with lodgers skippin' out on me, and the roof leakin', and the house needin' paperin'; sure nobody but a pig would live in the house you own.'

"'Pigs is living in it, and they got to pay their rent, Mrs. Callahan!'

"'Is it a pig you call me, ye spalpeen?'"

With excellent mimicry June was first the Milesian landlady and next the East Side property owner, and she ran off a dozen lines of dialogue which progressed in comedy until Ben was laughing heartily.

"It makes you laugh, does it?" asked June. "Then it will make the audience laugh. Write it down."

Ben began to write. In three hours they had produced a dozen scenes between the comedians—scenes which began with mutual contempt, ran the gamut of persiflage between ignorant members of the two humorous races, and gradually turned into mutual admiration, winding up with a grotesque proposal and acceptance.

June larded the lines with quips and gags from several well-known comedians, including a number of funny men she had met in burlesque. She did not tell Ben they were not original with her, and she knew they were not original with the actors who had used them to good effect. Like plums they went to enrich the pudding. And, like many another stumped author, Ben took inspiration where he could find it. When he finally laid down his last sheet of paper he had accomplished everything that Masterson had demanded.

"If it is necessary to make use of such stuff, I am grateful to you, June, for supplying it," he told her. "I couldn't have written a line of it myself."

"That's all right, kid," she assured him. "I could run on like that by the month. Now you fit these scenes into the right places and you've got a show."

CHAPTER XX.

THE NEW LEADING WOMAN.

"WEST of Broadway" was still a long way from being a show, despite June's prediction. It was true that Masterson read the comedy scenes with surprise and approbation, but the revisions and changes had only started. For several days they drove along in rehearsal, no longer a teacher with a row of scholars, but a company stumbling through preliminary rehearsals of a play. The chairs were arranged as they would be in the boarding house parlor. Lines were drawn with chalk on the floor to mark the sides of the stage and entrances and exits. The performers went on and off the imaginary stage, picking up their cues smartly enough, but still reading their lines with their eyes glued to the soiled and crumpled part books.

Ben was experiencing what comes to all writers in rehearsals, an abhorrence of his own work. No longer did it seem to him to be a good play; it was inane, stupid, silly, ineffective, hopeless. His lines had grown stale by countless repetitions, but he did not burn with ambition to change them. He wanted to grasp the script, hurl it through a window, take a train to some very distant point and hide. He obeyed the instructions of Masterson regarding revisions, but he could not see why they were necessary, nor could he put words together in a manner that seemed any improvement.

The director alone retained energy and decision. He drove incessantly—he seemed to retain enough of his senses to realize when a speech was delivered well or badly—and he labored with profane fury to get things the way he wanted them. The man's dynamic force astonished the beaten playwright who developed a "What's the use of anything?" attitude.

Two days after the collaboration with

June Jesson, a thin, wiry, wrinkled little Hebrew replaced the despondent ruin who had been playing the rent collector, and a good-natured, smiling, fat Irish woman of about fifty had come into the cast to play Mrs. Callahan.

Masterson had consulted neither Humbolt Green nor Ben regarding them. It was obvious they were several grades above the rest of the company. The young leading woman followed the original aspirant for the rôle of Evelyn; in her shoes stood a rather plump but youthful stock actress, who was a slight improvement. Two or three others had slipped unnoticed from the cast, and in each case their successors were improvements. Guy Pilgrim still held the fort, though Masterson regarded him with increasing disfavor. His inability to find a better man who would work in a piece produced by Humbolt Green was responsible for the ill-favored one remaining so long.

If Ben had needed anything else to complete his unhappiness, Sally furnished it. Sally wished to be taken to the theater and to dancing places afterward. After sitting in a rehearsal hall from 10 A.M. until 5 P.M., Ben staggered home with enough literary work to perform before the next rehearsal to keep a highly trained rewrite man going for two days.

He was neither physically nor mentally capable of relaxing with Sally, and he could not make her understand it. So Sally sulked and bickered with June in their furnished room or succeeded in slipping away from her watchful sister and keeping an engagement with a person or persons unknown.

It became the regular thing for June to creep into Ben's room at night. Sometimes she sat silently for hours, lighting one cigarette on the butt of another; sometimes she helped him copy out lines. She was useful when he wished to try the effect of a new line; she offered suggestions when they were requested, and kept quiet when she saw it was desirable.

She continually astonished him with the amount of technical knowledge of the stage which she possessed, and as their acquaintance progressed he noticed that her speech was improving, her errors in grammar were less frequent, and she was dropping cheap slang from her vocabulary. Once he mentioned his discovery to her, and she flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, I used to talk the way you and Sally do," she explained. "But I'm a lot like a parrot—I imitate the people around me. For about four years I only spoke to chorus girls and ham actors and fly press agents and fresh managers, and I sort of got to be like them, careless, and quick to grab the latest nifty. And when everybody around you swears like a pirate, you find yourself doing it without knowing it. Since I been with you and Sally I'm getting on to myself again."

"You are too nice a girl to cheapen yourself," he told her. "I wish I had more time to spend with Sally. After we get this show out of the way I'm going to try to make up to her for my neglect."

"You put the show over and make a lot of money, and Sally 'll forgive you. I wish I knew where she went to-night. She was out of the house before I got in and she did not leave any message."

"Do you suppose she is with Green?"

"Nothing would surprise me. That kid has a will of her own, and she pays as much attention to what I tell her as the Frenchies do when we ask them to please remit."

Ben looked distressed for a moment, then his work claimed his attention. There is nothing so effective to wipe out love troubles as the necessity for hard mental labor. Left to himself, Ben would not have worked—he was too much discouraged—but he was actually afraid of Last Hope Masterson. He felt obliged to report every morning with the stint of the night before completed.

The day came when they had to keep all persons who had rehearsed ten days or pay them two weeks' salary if they were discharged, and, with it, came Masterson, having in tow a fresh-faced boy of about twenty-three who had just come in from a stock company which had closed in Minneapolis. He had some slight experience in juvenile rôles, and an agreeable, wholesome personality.

"This is our hero," Masterson told Ben and Humbolt Green, who had come from his office for this important conference. "I don't know if he can play the part, but he is our last chance. Now I'm going to do something that will surprise you. I'm firing this leading woman and I'm putting Sally Jesson in the part."

"You're crazy," retorted Humbolt Green. "You've fallen for a pretty face. Remember what you said to me when I told you I wanted her to have a small part."

"Yeh, that's right. But this kid has got something. We've taken a terrible show. It's got a couple of acts in a lodging house and one in a cheap restaurant. It's dingy and smelly. I made Ludlow write in some comedy and got a couple of good people to play it; that helps. But we need youth and beauty to freshen the thing up. This Jesson kid is a lalapalooso—she'll knock them dippy when she smiles at them the way she did you, Green, and you, Ludlow, and the way she darn near knocks me.

"The rôle don't ask for much; she can walk through it, and I can show her how to walk. She's got a nice voice, refined and well pitched, and she's so conceited that she won't have stage fright. The new boy is all right, too; he can't act, but this is no emotional drama.

"Give me a pair of sympathetic young lovers and a good comedy team, and I can put out a show that will keep us from getting arrested in the dog towns."

"Can you put out a show that will get money on Broadway? That's what I want to know," said Green, with some sharpness.

Masterson smiled at him pityingly. "I'm no miracle man. The show isn't there. It's just a bit of slop, and all I'm doing is making it passable. Believe me, that's some job."

Ben swallowed his Adam's apple, hesitated, and then voiced his ambition—which was to get the thing out of the way, over, finished, into oblivion.

"If that's the way you feel about it, why go on?" he demanded. "Let's close the show and save our money."

"You can't do that," protested Masterson, who feared his frankness would cost him three or four weeks' salary.

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you why, Ludlow," explained Green. "The scenery is bought and paid for. The printing has been ordered and must be paid. If we quit now we have to pay two weeks' salary to the whole company."

"I'd rather take my loss and have it over with," persisted Ben.

"We are in so much, anyway. Now it isn't going to cost us any more to take it on the road for two weeks. We have traveling expenses, but on the other hand we take in money every night we play. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if we played to three or four thousand dollars a week on the road." He winked at Masterson as he said this.

"You mean we might get some of our money back?"

"Sure. And you can never tell about a show. I've heard directors talk like Masterson about pieces they were putting on and seen them go like a house afire. We may have a hit yet."

"I agree with Masterson that it is a very bad play," Ben said bitterly. "I was prejudiced because it was my own work, but I should think you would have had better sense than put on a thing like this with all your experience."

Masterson coughed and turned away to hide a grin.

"We go on," he said. "You agree to letting Jesson try the lead. If I'm wrong, we still have more than two weeks before the opening to stick in some experienced trouper. I know dames who could get up in that part in twenty-four hours."

"I'm agreeable," said Green. "I like Sally, and so does Ben, here."

The news was no surprise to Sally. Masterson had imparted it to her at dinner the night before. She had dined twice with Masterson, she had been with him upon the occasion when June had mentioned to Ben that she had not come home. Sally was impressed by authority, and Masterson's vigorous management of the company and his driving power had attracted her.

Besides, it pleased her to be singled out for attention by the person who was obviously in supreme control.

Masterson did not discharge Guy Pilgrim. He gave that young man the choice of leaving or taking over the rôle of the would-be seducer, which gave the original heavy man, who had been too heavy in the part, an opportunity to patrol the pavements.

Pilgrim agreed to shift if he could have a fifty-dollar advance, and admitted that he was down to a condition of near-starvation. So the rearranged and rejuvenated cast settled down to work.

Sally was letter-perfect in the rôle. June had bullied her into learning it when she was merely understudy, and now the lines rolled from her lips with a smoothness which astonished the troupers who were all jealous at her sudden rise to glory.

Masterson treated her with a kindness which caused the others to exchange significant looks; that type of actor is always glad to believe the worst, and they immediately assumed that she had established too friendly relations with the director.

In fact, aside from the two comedians, the new leading man, and Guy Pilgrim, there wasn't an actor in the outfit; they were misfits and hangers-on in the profession who were possible to Masterson because they were types. All they had to do was to look as they normally did and speak lines that fitted their personalities.

Yet the bitter-looking adventuress was accustomed to tell her friends how her talents went unrecognized because she would not sell herself to this and that manager, while even the gross, middle-aged character woman who played a bit in the restaurant scene would entertain any who heard her with tales of the wicked propositions she had refused.

How the rehearsals progressed from that time on Ben could not have told. He reveled in the fact of Sally playing herself in the play he had written around her. He hated the new leading man—the fellow was too familiar, too good-looking. He was sorry he had written in embraces and kisses if Sally was to indulge in them with somebody else. He wanted her to play the part and make a success, and he wanted her to give it up and come away with him where they would never hear of a play or a theater again. In fact, he didn't know what he wanted.

In the meantime Humbolt Green had been indulging in some frenzied finance. He was an expert in padding expense bills, making false entries in ledgers, changing figures on receipted notes, and avoiding creditors completely; but skillful as he was, the funds of the producing corporation were rapidly sinking.

Starting with ten thousand dollars, he had used some four thousand during the first two weeks in settling up personal accounts that were peremptory, like the money due the " Rosebud " company and the blackmail to Gladys Green, the relentless wife. He had spent freely about town, lived extremely well—and all such things cost a lot of money.

He had been forced to let Masterson lift his pay roll until the budget now was seventeen hundred and fifty dollars per week. It had cost more than he expected to patch up his old scenery after getting it out of storage, and the time had come to deposit with Equity the sum of approximately three thousand five hundred dollars to guarantee the salaries of the actors.

There was still ten days to go before " West of Broadway " would open, and the car fare of the company to Bellington, New York, was an item that was staring him in the face.

Several hundred dollars had been advanced to starving actors; Masterson had drawn two weeks' salary. Even with strict personal economy, he doubted if there would remain in the treasury enough to get the company out of town.

Originally, Humbolt Green had planned to call Ben Ludlow into conference about a week before the opening, display a mass of receipted bills, and present him with a summary showing that twenty thousand dollars had already gone into the enterprise. He would apologize for the unexpected expense, but he had figured that Ben would be full of enthusiasm over the play, confident that it would be a tremendous hit, and quite willing to cover another bad check

for five thousand dollars with a good check for an equal amount.

But from Ben's behavior at the interview it was evident to Green that he was in a poor frame of mind to be persuaded to invest another five thousand dollars in a hopeless enterprise; it was far more likely that he would insist upon the production being abandoned, in which case he might even be ungentlemanly enough to poke too closely into the accounts.

With his feet on his desk, his chair tipped way back, and his eyes closed, Humbolt Green went into executive session with himself. If Ludlow could not be maced into financing the company further, there must be some other way of securing money. Like a fool he had delivered to Ludlow his stock certificates; had he made an excuse to retain them, it was possible he might have sold them to somebody else.

Now he had nothing to sell except his own stock. He might dispose of half of that, or all of it. Why not? He had Masterson's assurance the play was hopeless. But Humbolt Green had the gambler's dislike for dropping anything in the way of a stake until the string was played out. The chances were a thousand to one in favor of "West of Broadway" being a complete flop, yet he would cling to the thousandth chance. Besides, he had nothing to sell. Nothing to sell? Well, didn't he have something to sell?

Mr. Green removed his feet from his desk and sat up straight in his chair. Into his rather fishy blue eyes came a cold, calculating glitter. Yes, he had something—something he had been reserving for himself, but in an emergency he was capable of making a sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BEAUTY-HUNTER.

THERE are many honest and reputable producers in the show business, men who keep their word, live up to the spirit as well as the letter of their contracts, whose lives are as clean as those of any other type of business man.

There are also dishonest, unprincipled, crafty, scheming, vicious and contemptible individuals clinging to the fringe of the business who manage, once in awhile, to produce a show with the aid of guileless backers whom they cheat. When such productions fail, these people make some profit. In the rare case of one of their enterprises succeeding they immediately begin to devise methods of robbing their partners of their just dues.

And there is a class of men more contemptible than those who are represented by Humbolt Green. They are persons who have grown rich in some other line of business, usually through dishonest methods, and they prowl at night about the theater districts. They try to scrape acquaintance with actresses, they turn the heads of foolish chorus girls by displays of wealth, they are the joy of the night cabaret, the support of the bootleggers, and they are the prey of managers like Humbolt Green.

Such men would not invest in an ordinary production, but they would buy into a production if it carried with it the friendship of a beautiful young woman. Humbolt Green could think of three or four wealthy rounders whose piggy eyes would gleam at the sight of the radiant blond beauty that belonged to Sally Jesson.

For the privilege of being a part owner in the company in which Sally Jesson was leading woman, a privilege which carried the right of invading the rehearsal room, of intruding into the actresses' dressing rooms, of hanging about in the wings, of displaying her on his arm in night clubs frequented by his kind, one of these would cheerfully put up five or ten thousand dollars.

Yes, Humbolt Green had something to sell. He hated to do it, because he had been reserving Sally for himself; she was so fresh and young and foolish and minus protective instinct. He would sell a quarter interest in the show to one of these birds of prey for seven thousand five hundred dollars after he had displayed Sally to him at a nice little supper party. He needed no more than three thousand dollars extra cash to carry on with, provided he got a good break with a New York theater, in which case he

would make a profit of four thousand five hundred dollars on the transaction. Should the piece be as hopeless on the opening night as Masterson said, he would close it at the end of its two weeks on the road and show a bigger profit.

Green was not selling the person of Sally Jesson; he was merely selling a permit for an interested person to become intimate with Sally. Anything more was up to her and the seductive powers of the new member of the firm.

Being fully aware that Ben Ludlow would murder him, he would be compelled to move carefully, but he flattered himself he could handle the whole thing so cleverly that Ben would not know what was going on at all.

Reaching for the telephone he called a certain number, got a secretary, and asked for Mr. Herbert Golding. It was with a grin of satisfaction that he hung up the receiver a few minutes later. Golding had been at home and, ever on the alert for an enjoyable party, had promised to attend Green's little blowout the following evening. The sucker was now on the hook, and if Green didn't land him it would not be his fault or Sally's.

There might be some trouble in getting Sally to the party; that cheeky little sister of her's might interfere—at the worst, he would invite both girls to the function; fortunately he had warned Golding to go slow. The first meeting would be polite enough; doubtless June Jesson would have no suspicion of what was back of everything.

Ben Ludlow couldn't come. The fellow was in love with Sally; he would be capable of making trouble if Golding said anything in the least off-color. Golding must not be scared away. He must be made to think the pickings were easy, and his cash must be secured at all costs.

In the sitting room of Humbolt Green's suite at the Marrington, a table was arranged for eight persons. On the pure white linen tablecloth was set, as a centerpiece, a silver bowl filled with American beauty roses. Two or three huge covered dishes indicated that this would be a buffet supper; Green had no intention of being interrupted by a procession of waiters. Beside every second plate was a corsage bouquet of violets and orchids. At every chair stood a silver bucket filled with ice, from which protruded the gold topped neck of a bottle of champagne.

Upon the buffet, which had been set up in a corner, were other interesting looking dishes. A grand piano stood invitingly open with a dozen popular songs lying upon the music rack, revealing their shrieking, colored covers. Green himself was in party regalia, his perfect-fitting dress coat, his white waistcoat, and his imported dress shirt, which arched itself over his slightly overfed stomach, his dress trousers, pressed until the creases were sharp as a knife, his studs glittering like real diamonds, making him magnificent.

He moved about, touching a vase of flowers on the mantel, changing the position of a big easy-chair near the window, picking up threads from the carpet, acting, in short, like an anxious hostess about to receive important social visitors for the first time.

Golding had sent up a case of champagne. Green had augmented the wine with several bottles of whisky and gin, and had laid in an ample supply of cigars and cigarettes.

As he had anticipated, June Jesson had refused to permit her sister to attend the party alone, so he had invited her with good grace. He had been compelled to tell her that it was a vital occasion, that he was entertaining several critics and the manager of a theater in New York which he wished to secure for " West of Broadway."

Being aware that many important theatrical deals are pulled off at parties in private rooms since the advent of prohibition, June did not doubt his statement, and she was quick to realize that Sally, if she were to be introduced to New York as a leading woman, would benefit by making the acquaintance of the critics.

Ben Ludlow had not been invited. When June asked why, Green told her that he did not wish the guests to know that " West of Broadway " was the work of a man so inexperienced, and he feared Ben would naïvely tell the truth about himself.

He had invited one newspaper man, a crony of his, who happened to be an advertising solicitor instead of a critic.

The fourth male person was a press agent of the same stripe as himself. June and Sally were Green's personal guests, the advertising man was bringing a girl from a musical revue, and the press agent had offered to escort a cloak model from a Fifth Avenue shop whom he guaranteed to be a good fellow.

Golding was the first to arrive. He came in a few minutes after eleven, cast a quick look around, grinned at the evidence of a real feast, nodded approvingly at the display of champagne in coolers, and took off his topcoat and hat without speaking.

"I'm glad you were able to come," said Humbolt Green.

Golding laughed shortly. "God help you if you've been kidding me. I broke a date to attend this party. Where's the *de luxe* chicken?"

Golding was a man of six feet, but so thin that he seemed taller. His face was long and narrow, his eyes sharp and observing. He was probably about fifty years old, but he preserved the appearance of youth as a result of careful grooming, numerous facial massages, a slim figure, and an air of alertness and ease. He wore a small black mustache over a long upper lip, and when he smiled his teeth were seen to be in good condition, though yellowed by cigarettes, one of which was now drooping from a corner of his mouth.

It was evident that he had breeding; as a matter of fact he belonged to a good New York family. In his college days he had been a famous sprinter; he had cashed in on his fame by selling bonds for a Wall Street house, and was now head of a firm of curb brokers which had not yet been banished from the exchange although its methods had frequently come in for criticism.

Nobody knew how rich he was; of course he owned a Rolls-Royce, belonged to many clubs, always attended first nights, was the host of large and riotous parties four or five times a week at the most expensive night clubs, and had been associated, in the scandal sheets, with half a dozen notorious beauties of the stage and about it.

Humbolt Green's relations with him were those of a jackal to a lion. On several occasions Mr. Green had effected introductions for him with stage women whose acquaintance he desired. While he accepted Green's services he despised him. He was not in the least deceived by the alleged party of the evening; he knew he was being invited to meet a certain girl who was playing in a Humbolt Green production, and that it would cost him a large sum to continue the acquaintance.

Inwardly he was laughing at Green, because he did not imagine the fellow had found a girl who could compare with half a dozen who were in his favor at present. If she turned out to be ordinary or uninteresting he would eat the supper, drink the wine provided by himself, and take his departure with his pocketbook unopened. That was what he expected would happen.

Before he had time to exchange half a dozen words with the giver of the entertainment Sally Jesson and her sister came into the room.

Sally was ablaze with excitement. Her great eyes shone with the delight which must have been *Cinderella's* when she first stepped into the ballroom and met the fairy prince. It was her first big New York party. She wore her one evening gown, a sheer pink affair which had cost very little, but Sally needed little to set off her dazzling beauty.

Not owning any jewels she wore none, but she had a new pair of slippers and flesh-colored sheer silk stockings, and her bare arms and neck were so lovely that Mr. Golding's eyes lit with such an avaricious light that Humbolt Green metaphorically shook hands with himself, for he knew that the deal would go through.

Beside Sally stood June, pretty enough surely, but compared to Sally, like a star to the golden moon. Blond hair is loveliest under electric light, and Sally's profusion of yellow tresses glittered like molten gold. And June wore an old evening dress which she had borrowed from a chorus girl in the Summer Garden. It did not fit her very well, and it had lost any beauty it might have had before its owner was willing to lend it.

Green darted forward, welcomed the girls heartily, and pressed Sally's hand with

special warmth. Then he led his angel forth.

"Let me present Mr. Golding, Miss Jesson, and Miss Sally Jesson. Be nice to Mr. Golding, girls, for he is one of the biggest men in Wall Street."

Sally pricked up her ears and regarded Mr. Golding with an interest beyond what his personality would have commanded.

"It won't be hard to be nice to Mr. Golding," she simpered.

"It wouldn't be hard to be nice to you," he retorted.

"How are you, Mr. Golding?" said June. "How's J. P. Morgan and all the other oppressors of the poor?"

Golding did not answer because he had not heard her. He was leading Sally to a far corner. And then the other guests came in together. A waiter appeared suddenly with a tray of cocktails.

June passed close to Sally and whispered hoarsely:

"Lay off that stuff."

Sally merely smiled at Mr. Golding and sipped her drink. There were general introductions, but in a few moments, three men were clustered about Sally, leaving the other women to talk with June and regard the blonde on the sofa with much disgust.

Green was all smiles. If Sally had been given instructions, she could not have behaved better; the financier was obviously at her feet already.

As they were moving toward the table, he managed to slip close to Golding and whisper:

"What do you think?"

"Marvelous," replied Golding. "I didn't believe anything like this was possible. I didn't know they made them any more."

And so the supper party started. The chorus girl and the model were the kind of women who usually attend such parties. One was the owner of a yellow, fluffy bob, with a round, hard little face beneath it, and a figure that had won her a place in the front row. The other was tall and graceful, very dark, with one of those uncurled black bobs which is cut to a point on the cheeks. She had a dazzling smile, beautiful teeth and a very calculating look in her eye.

The girls exclaimed delightedly at the sight of a quart of champagne apiece. They pinned on the corsage bouquets and threw themselves upon the *hors d'oeuvre.* June ate with gusto, drank with extreme caution. Sally was not eating at all, she was too excited. She leaned her elbows on the table and turned her head so that she could gaze into the eyes of the infatuated financier whose face was within a few inches of her own.

Green cut loose, told stories, kept the one waiter busy filling glasses, paid no attention whatever to his partner, who was June, and never took his eyes off the pleasing sight of the curb broker and the girl from Weedonville. He was already raising the price of his stock, and considering selling his entire interest. He figured that he might get fifteen thousand for a half interest from Golding, then catch Ben in a despondent moment and buy his half for five thousand dollars. He never lost sight of the main chance, did Humbolt Green.

Suddenly, during a lull, the voice of the cloak model was heard telling a story, a naughty story. As Sally realized just how wicked this story was, despite her desire to appear sophisticated, greatly to her shame and dismay, she felt herself blushing. It was a bright crimson blush that covered her bosom, her neck and her cheeks. Golding watched it with growing wonder.

Could it be possible, that, at this day and age, in New York City, at a theatrical supper party, he had found an actress, an exquisitely lovely young girl, who was really innocent?

He saw the look of distress in her eye and misinterpreted it. Sally was distressed because she was blushing; he supposed she was distressed at the character of the story.

"I beg your pardon," he said rudely to the well-meaning model, "permit me to remind you that there is a young lady here who may not be as depraved in mind as the rest of us, and I shall take it as a favor if you will not finish that story."

"Well, I'll be damned," observed the cloak model. The chorus girl uttered a shrill laugh which she stopped by covering her mouth with her hand. The advertising

solicitor chortled roughly, unabashed by the glare from Mr. Golding. As for the press agent, he looked at Golding with astonishment, for he knew him of old, and remarked, *sotto voce:*

"The *roué* is hooked at last."

Humbolt Green rose to the occasion.

"Let's can the rough stuff, folks," he suggested. "This is a swell party, and I'm sure none of you ladies want us to get telling dirty stories. The boys could tell some that you wouldn't like."

"My Gawd," exclaimed the model, gazing at Golding with incredulity. "If this guy has joined the Y. M. C. A., then I'm going to join the Salvation Army."

"Please don't mind me," said Sally. "I don't want to spoil your party."

"Hush, little girl," soothed the notorious Mr. Golding. "I know what's best for you."

"Tell her about Little Red Riding Hood," suggested the chorus girl.

"What a dud this show turned out to be," declared the advertising solicitor.

CHAPTER XXII.

BEN MEETS HIS NEW RIVAL.

BEN LUDLOW, up to his neck in work, met the new partner in the firm of Green and Ludlow the following afternoon when he was trying, manfully, to conduct a rehearsal. The reason that he was conducting the rehearsal was that Masterson had failed to come back from lunch. The company had returned at two o'clock, waited ten, twenty, thirty minutes for the director, then indulged in whispering and understanding looks. Masterson's lack of reliability was well-known in the profession.

Something had to be done, so Ben did it. He took up the script and ordered them to run through the first act. By this time the *mise en scène* was pretty well understood and some semblance of dramatic action could be distinguished. As the players knew that the author had a half interest in the piece, they accepted his direction with flattering eagerness, though they assumed that Masterson had walked out on the show, which meant curtains.

It was then that Humbolt Green entered, accompanied by a tall, thin man, whom Ben did not know. Sally happened to be having a scene with the leading man. She caught the eye of the visitor and colored, then completely forgot her line. Ben gave it to her with a patient smile; she floundered on a sentence or two and stopped again.

Although it is not etiquette to interrupt a rehearsal, Green did not hesitate to do it. The absence of Masterson alarmed him.

"Pardon me, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "Just take seats for a few moments. Where the hell is Masterson?" he demanded of Ben in a lower tone.

"I wish I knew," said the boy, drearily. "He didn't come back from lunch."

"Up to his old tricks again," growled the producer. "Better call the rehearsal off for the day. I think I know where to find him."

"To-morrow at ten o'clock, ladies and gentlemen," said Ben. "That's all for to-day."

The appearance of Golding had caused a hum of surprise. Those who knew who he was told those who did not, and hope immediately rose in their breasts. For some days, the actors had been convinced that the play would close after two weeks on the road, if not sooner. Several of them would have jumped the show and picked up something else, save that their Equity contracts, which forced the manager to guarantee them at least two weeks' salary, bound them to pay two weeks' salary to the manager if they abandoned the company.

But Golding was a well-known man-about-town; he financed shows; he was an angel; if he were interested, the play would go on. The question was who the woman might be who had attracted him to this forlorn aggregation, and one look at him as he gazed at Sally gave them the desired information.

June bit her lip angrily; she knew exactly what they were thinking; Sally's reputation would be torn to shreds, but, as nothing was said, there was nothing she could do. Utterly unaware that she had become a scarlet woman in the eyes of her fellow-players, Sally was looking up sweetly at

Golding, who was complimenting her upon very questionable histrionic talent. And Ben was getting red with anger to see her flirting so openly with the dashing stranger.

The performers straggled out. June thrust herself between Sally and Golding with outstretched hand.

"Of course you remember me, Mr. Golding," she said. "I was the person who stepped on your foot in the subway."

"Ha, ha. You are Miss Jesson's sister," he retorted, amiably enough. "You don't suppose I would forget a sister of hers."

"Any friend of O'Reilly is a friend of mine."

"June," complained Sally. "Mr. Golding and I were talking."

"Sally has no secrets from me," declared June, meaningly. "I go with her everywhere. In fact, she wouldn't accept any engagement that didn't include me."

"Very praiseworthy, I am sure," smiled Golding who understood her perfectly. "I was thinking of inviting you both to dinner to-night."

"I'm afraid we have an engagement to-night. We're dining at the Ritz and going on to the opera."

"June, how can you say such monstrous things?" demanded Sally.

"To-morrow night, then. I shall take you both to dinner and the theater."

"We'll be delighted," said Sally, before June could think of another falsehood.

"Oh, sure," June grinned, feeling that she had better make the best of it. "You must get us home early, though. A rising young actress like Sally has to have lots of sleep."

"Who is that old goat?" Ben was demanding. "Why did you bring him to the rehearsal?"

"That's Herbert Golding, one of the biggest men on Broadway. He owns a couple of theaters and he's going to fix it up for us to get our New York house. I had to sell him a piece of the show to get him interested."

"You mean he bought an interest in this show?" asked Ben, genuinely astonished.

"Certainly. We've got a hit here."

"How do you know? You haven't seen a rehearsal."

"I don't have to. I can tell. And Masterson really thinks we've got something. Of course, he wouldn't admit it to you because that's his way."

"If he thinks so, why did he leave us in the lurch to-day?"

"I suppose he got bending the elbow. He'll be all right in the morning."

"Your friend seems to be well acquainted with Sally Jesson. Look at them."

"Oh, he met her at a party last night."

"Indeed! What party?"

"Look here," said Green, truculently. "I deny your right to ask questions. It's your business to work on this show. That's your half of the transaction. I look after the business. Golding is going to save this proposition and I don't care if he talks to all the actresses in the cast."

"I thought you were a friend of Sally's."

"So I am. Say, her sister was with her at that party last night, and you know what a spitfire she is."

"Well, if June was there I suppose it was all right."

"Certainly. I want you to meet the author, Mr. Golding, if you can tear yourself away from those two beauties."

"We're going," said June. And they went.

Golding regarded Ben with some amusement. He had come to an agreement with Humbolt Green, but he had not been an easy victim. He had acquired half Green's holdings in the play for five thousand dollars. He told him frankly that he was tossing the money into the fire and he didn't propose to toss any more than five thousand. He had skimmed through the script after he had handed the producer his check.

"What do you think of it?" asked Humbolt Green.

"I've been robbed," he said with a grin. "Let's go around to the rehearsal and see if I can't get some compensation."

On their way home Sally and June were quarreling.

"Now, see here, June," began Sally, "I've stood enough of your insufferable interference. Mr. Golding is my friend, not yours, and you had no business horning in on my invitation."

"It's my business to see that you don't make a fool of yourself."

"One might think that I was a baby," protested Sally, "the way you follow me around and try to supervise all my actions. I am of age and I won't let you boss me, just because you allow me a contemptible twenty dollars a week."

"Sally," sighed June, "you're such a fool. I've got to look after you. When you have a fellow like Ben crazy about you, why do you make eyes at an old rooster like this Golding? He's fifty if he's a day."

"He's not. And if he were, what difference does it make? Mr. Golding is a big man, a man of the world, with a broad outlook and he is rich and generous. He told me he had a Rolls-Royce and he would put it at my disposal. All I have to do is to phone the garage any time I want it and the chauffeur will bring it around and take me for a ride."

"Same old game," commented June. "You wouldn't believe it to look at me, but I've had old ganders put Rolls Royces at my disposal. That's all the good it did them."

"I forbid you to call Mr. Golding a gander."

"All right, crocodile."

Sally stamped her foot and tears of anger stood in her eyes.

"You are impossible," she declared. "Don't you speak another word to me. And as for Ben Ludlow, he's an idiot. The old play is no good, and he's put every cent he owns in it."

"Darling angel, you sound mercenary to me."

"I'm not mercenary, but I like nice things and it's agony to me to be cooped up in that smelly lodging house. I haven't even got my own bed."

"Cheer up, Sally, I'll sleep on the floor, if that's what you'd like."

"You know it isn't, but if I married Ben, I'd be a poor man's wife. If I married Mr. Golding—"

"The good Lord give you sense," breathed June. "You don't suppose Golding would marry you?"

"He might if I gave him encouragement. He is wonderful to me. Did you hear him stop that horrid woman last night for fear she would hurt my feelings?"

They had reached the foot of Mrs. Callahan's steps; June grasped her arm and prevented her from ascending.

"Didn't you ever read the magazines down in Weedonville? Didn't you read the Sunday papers? Haven't you heard of the hundreds of innocent girls that go wrong because they believed crafty old rounders like Golding? That man won't marry."

Sally tore herself loose. She ran up two steps then bent over to hiss in June's face:

"Oh, I didn't know people as vile as you existed. You must have a perfectly dreadful mind even to think of such things. I'm ashamed you are my sister. You naked model, you!"

June did not follow her. She stood as if petrified for a moment, then walked slowly down the street. She was sniffing. Presently she drew out a tiny handkerchief, looked to right and left for spectators, saw none, and wiped her eyes.

"I suppose I had it coming to me," she muttered. "But I wouldn't have said anything like that to her."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SALLY.

A WEEK before the opening date Ben Ludlow saw his first stage rehearsal. It is customary for a piece well advanced in rehearsals to borrow a theater stage for the last four or five "repetitions." Usually there is no charge made beyond the cost of lights and small fees to the house crew. So many plays are rehearsing in New York that most of the theaters are given over to rehearsals during the mornings and afternoons except, of course, matinée days, of pieces which may never play the particular house in which they are preparing.

His repugnance for his own creation had worn off in a week; now he was experiencing enthusiasm again. It did not seem possible that scenes and situations which were going so well could fail to please the public. He got an immense thrill the first time he sat in the dark auditorium and saw his

company running through his play upon a real stage with footlights and scenery. True, the set in which they were working happened to be the Square of St. Mark's, in Venice, while they were playing scenes laid in a boarding house parlor, but the painted canvas and the lights, the curtain, the backdrop, the atmosphere of a playhouse enchanted the neophyte.

Masterson had turned up the day after his lapse, little the worse for wear. His only explanation to Ben was that the damn show would drive any man to drink. For some days he had dispensed with Ben's services as author, and as he had always ignored his rights as a producer, the boy was about as important as the fifth wheel of a coach. The piece was set, for weal or woe. After they had seen it before an audience they might have to tear it apart and put it together again, but the intensive rewriting was over.

The knowledge that a man with money was interested in the production had pepped up the performers wonderfully, and they were now working with some approach to enthusiasm. Masterson accepted many improvements in lines suggested by the actors and the last big job which Ben had been called upon to do was the complete revision of an important scene at the end of the second act along lines proposed by Guy Pilgrim.

A palship of a sort had sprung up between June Jesson and the hero, demoted to be the villain; they went together to lunch at a one-arm institution near the rehearsal hall, they chatted in corners during moments when they were not reading their lines, and they found much to laugh about together.

Curiously enough, Ben Ludlow resented this. Although he was desperately in love with Sally, he had come to enjoy his conversations with June, relied on her judgment, adopted her suggestions. He felt Pilgrim was no fit companion for a girl like her and he took occasion to inform her of his opinion, which June received with a rather hard laugh.

"You've got enough to do supervising Sally," she said, "and you aren't doing it very well. Can't you break up this Golding business? I butted in on a couple of their parties, but both of them made it so unpleasant for me that I butted out again."

"I should think you could manage your own little sister," he retorted. "After all, I have no authority over her."

"Get it. Carry her off her feet. Be a caveman. That will fetch her."

"I did try to kiss her the other night, and she slapped my face," he said ruefully. "What do you see in this fellow, Pilgrim? I think he is a cheap Broadway loafer."

"There isn't so much class to me, is there?"

"Certainly, there is."

"Thanks. Pilgrim isn't bad. He's a poor kid that has been having a tough time because he thought he ought to play heroes.

"He's exactly the type for a modern heavy, not the black mustache, curly-haired, handsome villain, with riding boots and diamond rings that they used to have, but the kind of villains we know around Broadway—sneaky, slippery, crafty crooks that roam up and down the West Forties. He will be good in this show. Besides, he's come through with some real ideas. I'm not wasting my time."

Sally was a big problem for Ben. There are very few girls of nineteen who could keep their heads under the conditions in which she was placed. Coming to New York, a few weeks before, from a life of household drudgery in a small town, she had been made the leading woman of a theatrical production overnight, had been flattered by the attentions of a producer, Humbolt Green, was being rushed by a celebrated man-about-town, Herbert Golding, and had, as an abject slave, Ben Ludlow, author of the play in which she was to appear.

Never having enjoyed any important attention before, she now had three men in love with her; consciousness of her beauty went to her head. If Ben had been less blindly in love her attitude toward him would have offended him deeply and opened his eyes, but he merely whined like a pup when she neglected him and fawned on her when she condescended to devote a little time to him.

The first evidence of the new growth of

Sally's head came when she visited Humbolt Green and suggested that her name be put in electric lights when the play struck Broadway; also that her salary be increased to three hundred a week.

Green, having resigned his claims to her affections in favor of his money man, was no longer interested in flattering her vanity. He laughed loudly and rudely.

"Who's been feeding you meat?" he demanded. "You, a star! Why, you empty-headed little dumb-bell, you haven't appeared before your first audience yet. You'll have to work for years before you get your name in lights and you've got to show a lot more talent than I've seen you display in rehearsals."

"It's a star part," said Sally. "The whole play is about Evelyn. It won't cost you anything to make a star out of me and, if you are as good a friend of mine as you claim, you'll do it."

"Listen, baby," he said more seriously. "You may get by in the part if we don't call especial attention to you. As a matter of fact, the big part is Mrs. Callahan, the landlady, and if I starred anybody I'd star Mary Clancy in that part. Why, you are liable to get stage fright the opening night and ruin the whole affair. Work hard and maybe some day you'll be a star. Just now I'm busy."

"And I want my salary raised," added Sally. "It's ridiculous that the leading woman should only be getting a hundred a week when minor actors are getting more."

Green grinned at her exasperatingly.

"You've got one requisite of a successful actor," he said. "Gall. If I want to pay three hundred, I can get a girl who is an established favorite to play the part, somebody who will bring money into the box office.

"For Heaven's sake, Sally, don't you realize how lucky you are? A few weeks ago you were broke. You are going to get a hundred a week and be introduced to Broadway as a leading woman. Let well enough alone."

Sally regarded him coldly, quite unimpressed by his arguments.

"Mr. Golding thinks I ought to be starred and get a big raise in salary."

Chickens had come home to roost. Humbolt Green thrust his hands through his hair, then gave vent to anger.

"Golding be damned!" he exclaimed. "He isn't running this company. I won't have him interfering in my business. What does he mean handing a kid like you a line and swelling your foolish little head?"

Sally rose to her full height and looked at him with what she considered must express utter scorn.

"I shall tell Mr. Golding what you said," she declared, then strode out of the office with the stride of a blond Valkyrie.

That night she dined with Ben Ludlow. During dinner she was so charming that poor Ben floated around in a cloud of delight. With the coffee she told him of her ambition. Although Ben was not acquainted with the theory of making stars, his love blindness did not prevent him from realizing that Sally was becoming rather lofty, and, as she knew that half the show belonged to him, he felt that she should realize that tripling her salary would mean a heavy drain on his pocket. But he dared not tell her so; instead he temporized.

"Let's wait until the play opens, Sally, and see how the public likes it. If you make a big hit, you ought to be starred and if we make lots of money, I certainly shall see that you get a salary commensurate with what you are doing for us. You go ahead and play the part so marvelously that you will make Humbolt Green star you."

Even Sally saw that this was a reasonable argument. She lit a cigarette—she had learned to smoke since becoming an actress—and she did it very gracefully.

"If I do well the opening night, will you make me a star?"

"Well," evaded Ben, "you see, it depends upon how Humbolt Green feels about it. I only own half the show."

"Hum! Mr. Golding owns a quarter because Humbolt sold it to him. That makes you and Mr. Golding own three-quarters, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Then if you and Mr. Golding want to make me a star, between you, with three-quarters, you ought to be able to make

Humbolt Green, who only owns one-quarter, agree with you."

"It happens that neither Golding nor myself is a showman. We depend entirely upon Green for the business arrangements. I don't think we can make him do anything."

"You don't want to make me a star," said Sally with ready tears in her preposterous eyes.

"Oh, yes, I do, Sally," he exclaimed in alarm.

"You don't. Mr. Golding is the only friend I have. He wants to make me a star."

"So do I." Golding must not be allowed to escape with the credit of the inevitable stardom of Sally.

The rainbow of her smile dazzled him. "Then it's all settled. If I get good notices on the opening, I'm going to be starred."

"Yes."

Humbolt Green had realized that he was taking a slight chance when he reduced his holdings in "West of Broadway," but he had never supposed that simple little Sally Jesson would have aligned the majority stockholders against him.

"And I get my salary raised?"

"Just as soon as we know the piece is a hit."

"But supposing it isn't a hit?"

"Then your stardom won't do you much good."

Sally nodded confidently. "It will be a hit. I'll make Mr. Golding do something about it."

"Golding," stormed Ben Ludlow. "For Heaven's sake, Sally, what do you see in that old vulture? You surely can't like a man old enough to be your father."

"He's got lots of money, Ben, and he can do wonderful things for the play, and I must keep friends with him for your sake as well as mine."

"Thank you very much, but I prefer to win or lose without assistance from that fellow. If the play is good it will succeed, if it isn't, it won't, and nothing he can do will make any difference. You needn't keep chummy with him on my account."

"But he is so respectful and kind to me, and he takes me places where you couldn't afford to take me, and, really, Ben, it is just a fatherly interest he takes in me."

"I don't like him, and pretty soon I'm going to punch him on that long nose of his."

"Just you dare do such a thing!"

Sally sulked the rest of the evening, and Ben was glad to take her home at midnight.

The young lady's selfishness would have been evident to anybody but a lover. Even Ben had a vague feeling that evening that Sally wasn't behaving as the girl he believed her to be should behave, but he was too much in love to see her as she was.

She was a simple little baby, a creature of impulses, thoughtless because she was so young, she would outgrow these little faults, she did not realize how she was hurting him, perhaps she was being friendly with Golding for his sake, doing her little best in her own way to help their mutual welfare.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BIG NIGHT.

"WEST OF BROADWAY" was scheduled to open in Bellington, New York, on Monday evening, November 4. The company went down on Sunday morning in a day coach, with the scenery in the baggage car behind. Sally, Masterson, Humbolt Green, and Herbert Golding were in the Pullman car. Ben accompanied the rest of the troupe, the three stage hands and the company manager in the day coach, where he listened to grumbling from the performers about a cheap management which did not provide them with Pullman seats. A few days before a press agent had slipped into Bellington with posters and window cards and made a half-hearted effort to bill the town.

Bellington was one of those unfortunate cities which get many of the new shows before they are taken to Broadway or thrown into the discard. It was inhabited by a wary public which would not purchase tickets for any entertainment that had not run a year in New York. To collect an audience for an untried piece was exceedingly difficult as the townsfolk had become

weary of accepting passes, in fact, had to be coaxed to enter free.

Those who came realized their importance as critics, and had grown very hard boiled from long experience. Knowing that nine out of ten new productions were doomed to failure they loved to predict the downfall of a play and see their judgment vindicated by its subsequent history.

So utterly useless for tryout purposes have the theatergoers of the "dog towns" become, as a result of this state of mind, that many prominent managers now omit such tryouts, preferring to open cold in New York and stand or fall on the verdict of the Broadway first-nighters.

It has come to pass that the people of these towns frequently turn their thumbs down on plays that afterward delight New York. The total receipts of a play for a week of tryout stands are usually insufficient to pay the traveling expenses of the performers and the bills for cartage and stage hands.

When Humbolt Green had informed Ben that they would take in four thousand dollars per week he was making a deliberate misstatement; he had no illusions whatever, but Ben Ludlow knew none of these things and looked forward hopefully to a big, enthusiastic, paying audience on the opening night. June Jesson knew better, but she did not have the heart to tell him.

They settled themselves at various hotels and boarding houses in the city of Bellington, spent the afternoon wandering about, and assembled at seven in the evening, at the dark and clammy opera house, for the dress rehearsal. For the first time Ben was to set eyes upon the scenery of his production.

In the theater when the curtain went up were less than a dozen people, who included Green, Golding and Ludlow; Masterson, who sat with a flash light and a pad of note paper about six rows back in the center; the house manager, a broken down Broadway company manager; Jackson, who had been engaged as manager of "West of Broadway;" Flynn, the press agent, and one or two women friends of the local theater director.

The play began. Humbolt Green's dingy scenery went well enough as the dismal parlor of the lodging house. His decrepit furniture was quite in keeping with the place. And the quartet of frowzy types who were discovered upon the stage were the sort of folks to be found in such a place. June came on and did her bit from chorus girl life. The leading man entered, and gradually the story unfolded.

To Ben, who was realizing the dream of a lifetime, everything was marvelous. He was indescribably thrilled to see his story come to life. Even the familiarity of the rehearsals did not prevent his acute reactions to the dialogue and the situations.

His heart almost ceased beating when Sally entered like a bright light being turned on in a dark room. She was ravishing in her make-up and her simple little dress.

This dress, by the way, was a Paquin model. Golding had volunteered to provide the costume for Sally, and Humbolt Green had acquiesced with his tongue in his cheek. The two women present tittered at the incongruity of an obviously imported suit upon a poverty-stricken little dweller in the cells of a lodging house, and June, watching from the wings, uttered an exclamation of astonishment and apprehension. She knew who must have supplied that costume.

But Sally was good in the part. Her lines were put over with excellent diction and her voice had resonance; Humbolt Green watched her in astonishment, and Golding smacked his lips.

The act went on to its finish. As the curtain descended Ben rushed to Masterson with several suggestions, but the director gave no heed. He had lighted a cigar, and his pad of note paper was unmarred by a pencil mark.

"It's all right," he told the anxious author. "Don't worry. There's no use in upsetting them."

"How did you like it?" demanded Ben.

"How did you like it?" he parried.

"I thought it was marvelous. It surpassed my expectations."

"There is no use in my saying anything, then."

"What did you think of it?" Green was asking Golding.

"That girl is sublime. She is the most beautiful thing I ever set eyes on."

"But the show."

"Oh, that? Terrible. It'll never go in the world."

"I didn't think it was so bad."

"It's squashy, I tell you. Antique ideas, silly situations; some of those jokes are a hundred years old."

"Then you don't think it has a chance?"

"I'll sell you back my quarter interest for five hundred dollars."

"I don't want it," admitted Green.

"I didn't expect you would."

The second act betrayed the shoddiness of Green's production. Supposed to be set in a brilliant night club, it was much more like a cheap Italian *table d'hôte*. And the third act—the lodging house chamber—went on without the presence of Golding or Green, who were back at the hotel sampling a bottle of Scotch in Golding's apartment.

But Ben did not desert the ship. He saw no reason for doing so, and Masterson made a pretense of doing his work. He stopped the big scene in the cabaret, suggested rearranging several chairs and tables, made the actors repeat the scene. Sally was resplendent in an evening dress, which was a greater triumph than her first-act costume, beside which the other evening dresses supplied by Humbolt Green looked like the hand-me-down affairs that they were.

Things kept going wrong in the last act. Actors could not remember their lines. Sally caught the fever and made hash of her final scene with the leading man.

Humorous lines which do not fall upon the ears of an audience and draw a burst of laughter, sound very flat. There was nobody to be amused by the dialogue, since it was familiar to everybody out front save the house manager, who had long since departed. The play ended with a discouraged lot of actors, a director who seemed in a stupor, and an author whose enthusiasm for his own work did not survive the general apathy.

"It will be different with an audience," Ben assured June Jesson, whom he accompanied back from the theater to the boarding house, where both had secured rooms. Ben was not aware that a company is supposed to pay the expenses of an author traveling with the troupe during the try-out period, and Humbolt Green had not informed him of the fact. His surplus had already dwindled as a result of the inroads of the last month.

"Don't hope too much from the audience you'll get here," the girl warned him. "They'll be dead heads, sitting on their hands."

"But the house seats a thousand people. We'll have several hundred persons who paid their way in."

"Kid, you'll be lucky if you have twenty-five, and they'll all be in the gallery. Nobody goes to these new shows."

"Then why did we come?" he asked in bewilderment.

"It's a mystery to me. You better toddle down to the hotel and talk to Sally. Probably Masterson and Green will want you to rewrite the show before to-morrow night."

Sally was stopping at the chief hotel; she had turned a deaf ear to June's protests, and declared that the leading woman simply had to be at the best hotel. Ben called her room but got no answer. Then the clerk told him that Green, Masterson and Miss Jesson were in Golding's apartment holding a conference. He felt himself justified in joining them.

When he entered he found the quartet sitting around a table with a high ball in front of each, including Sally. He frowned, but Sally greeted him cheerfully, and the others motioned for him to join them.

"We were just saying," said Humbolt Green, "that dress rehearsals always go badly."

"Sure," declared Masterson. "Bad dress rehearsal, good performance, that's the rule."

"I didn't think it was so bad," protested the author. A burst of laughter greeted him. Even Sally joined in.

"It was terrible," laughed Green.

"I'd like to know why."

"I'll tell you what is the matter with your show," said Golding. "As an interested party you don't mind my speaking frankly?"

"No, no, go ahead," were the answers from the circle.

"You've got an old story. The poor little country girl, the bad rich man, the poor but noble young hero, the temptations from which the hero saves the girl, her determination to turn from the seducer—say it's a wonder you didn't get the famous line in: 'Rags are royal raiment when worn for virtue's sake!'"

"If I'd thought of it I would have stuck it in," interrupted Masterson, with a chuckle.

"That's your plot. Rotten. Now, your characters are all low comedy and burlesque types, everybody has seen them and the piece is full of gags that were old when Joe Miller was a little boy."

"That's Masterson's fault. He made me write in all those old gag lines and build up those cheap comedy parts," protested the author.

"Gee!" exclaimed Masterson. "I had to get something in or there would be no play at all."

"What are we going to do?" groaned Ben, who saw his play a failure, his savings dissipated, himself turned out, disgraced by the fiasco, and without a cent to carry on with.

"Put up a two weeks' closing notice tomorrow night," suggested Golding.

"It isn't necessary. We can close the show without notice at the end of two weeks."

"Do you mean to say you won't take us into New York?" wailed Sally.

"Don't you mind, little girl," crooned Golding, leaning toward her. "I'll take care of you."

With difficulty, Ben refrained from striking the man. He was silent while the gloomy conference continued.

"Then it's settled that we close in two weeks," concluded Green.

Ben Ludlow sprang to his feet.

"It is not," he declared. "You are condemning this play because of a dress rehearsal. I demand that it be given a chance. All the money I have is in it. My future as a writer is at stake. I won't agree it is a bad play until it has been proved by the attitude of audience and critics."

"Keep your shirt on," Green advised him. "We are running two weeks. We can always continue if the show justifies it. This is a private conference. Publicly, we believe we have a hit. And remember, Sally, don't you breathe a word to a soul about this conversation."

"I'll answer for Sally" said Golding, with a proprietary air.

"But your very attitude is bad for the show," Ben informed them. "If the management throws up its hands before we open, the actors are sure to sense it. For heaven's sake, let's fight."

Masterson banged his fist on the table so that the glasses bounced.

"The kid is right. We're not licked till we're licked. And since you feel that way about it, let's you and I go into executive session, Ludlow. I think we can pep it up here and there."

June's dismal prediction regarding the opening night audience proved to be too accurate. Although the press agent had forced three hundred pairs of passes into the hands of unwilling recipients, the white paper attendance was only about two hundred, while the box office statement showed that seventeen dollars and fifty cents worth of tickets had been sold for the great event. The orchestra was two-thirds empty, the balcony entirely so, while a score of intrepid young people had the second balcony to themselves.

A very bad house orchestra played a melancholy overture and the curtain rose upon the sort of an audience which would have voted the biggest New York hit a bad show if it hadn't been impressed by the publicity that show had received.

Hoping against hope, Ben sat in the back row. However, no one in his mental condition could possibly remain seated; before ten minutes had passed he was standing in the rear of the orchestra where he was joined by Humbolt Green who chewed nervously upon an unlighted cigar.

"Here's a fine state of affairs," announced Green. "That bum Jackson, that I hired to run the front of the house never showed up. I suppose he got so disgusted with the rehearsal that he started on a bat. Instead of sitting down and watching the

play, I've got to keep my eye on the box office."

"I don't suppose it would matter if they stole all the receipts. It doesn't look as if there was anything in the theater but paper and very little of that."

"Well," predicted Green, "this always was a terrible town. It will be better in Greenboro Wednesday night; we'll get an idea there what kind of a trick we've got here."

A titter ran through the house, a few loud laughs resounded.

Ben pricked up his ears and his eyes lighted. "Why," he stammered, "they're laughing. They like it."

"Did you hear what they were laughing at? That Jew's gag about the Irish being rich. We'll have to cut that out in New York. Only these kind of hicks would stand for it."

A second laugh was heard, a mild abashed laugh, but still an indication of some amusement. It was the Irishwoman's answer.

"Terrible stuff," commented Green. "Masterson must have been desperate to stick those things in."

Golding was not there to add caustic comments; he was sitting in a stage box, the only person in the house in evening dress and he started a feeble round of applause for Sally upon her entrance.

Sally could not see beyond the footlights, and if she had been able to do so there would have been no sea of faces to scare her, thus she went through her rôle quite successfully.

The other actors had rallied, as actors usually do upon an opening, and the act ran its length without hitch or untoward incident.

At the curtain there was a faint rattle of applause, upon which the curtain man ran up the curtain and Sally and her leading man came forward and bowed.

Golding stood up in his box and threw a bunch of flowers upon the stage which Sally picked up rather awkwardly. He shouted: "Bravo! Bravo!" and drew a titter from the hard boiled audience, which caused him to flop back into his seat.

Ben cursed himself that he had not thought to buy flowers for Sally, then rushed hatless into the street, hoping to find a florist open. When he returned empty-handed, the curtain was going up upon the second act.

At the end of the second act, the house manager approached the critic of the only morning newspaper. The critic was also city editor and one of the two reporters, but he had a wide experience reviewing shows; he had seen many that the New York critics never had a chance to criticize.

"What do you think of it, hey?" asked the house manager.

"Oh, it's one of those things," replied the critic.

The house manager, with a malicious smile, reported this damning comment to Humbolt Green, who winced. Ben didn't know what the remark meant, so he did not suffer.

Eventually, the final curtain fell and the meager audience made its way toward the exits. There had been some laughter, occasional mild applause, but no real enthusiasm. Ben listened eagerly for opinions from the patrons as they passed. This is the sort of thing he heard.

"Darn pretty girl, that leading woman."

"The Jew and the Irishwoman were funny."

"I've seen worse."

"Pretty bad show."

"Wouldn't you hate to have paid for your seat?"

"I thought it was pretty good."

"If they'd play the first act second and the second act first, it would go much better."

Humbolt Green gave Ben the slip, Masterson succeeded in getting away without his seeing him. Finally, they turned out the house lights and Ben went around to the stage door. He had experienced his opening and he didn't know any more about his show than before the curtain went up on the first act. Himself quite incapable of listening, he had expected to stand or fall on the verdict of the audience, but there was no verdict and little audience.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Sis Boom—Florida!

By THOMAS THURSDAY

ACCORDING to the movies—not Hoyle—any lad that doesn't happen to live within a stonehead's throw of Broadway, New York, is either a hick, boob, blockhead, or take your choice. City slickers, when short of long change, buy a ticket for some Rural Free Delivery port, open an office, and proceed to peddle preferred stock in Alligator Hair Tonic, Limited, to the cow-chasers. After cleaning up like a vacuum cleaner, they board the brass-railed observation platform of the Gotham Express, nonchalantly place a thumb to their beak and, as the train pulls out, make the four fingers wave like Kansas wheat in the breeze.

All of which is no trouble at all—in the movies. However, if you believe that, I *won't* tell you another. Instead, I'll broadcast the case of Heber Craw, from the nesty little village of Salvation Falls, Vermont. What Heber did to me and "Windy" Dana is a classic, I'll tell whoever's listening! That being the case, let's proceed with the proceedings.

Two days after the season closed for the Greater Consolidated Circus I received a telegram from "Honest Jack" Duffy, the big boss, asking me to call at the New York office for a business conference. As I entered his trap he wiggled a cigar in his Rooseveltian teeth and a shrewd gleam shot out of his eyes.

"Doc," he began, getting right down to business, "what do you think of the Florida boom?"

"Everything!" I says. "I been reading all—"

"Blooey for that!" he snaps. "There's more pish-posh written about Florida today than you'll find in the best fiction magazines on the stands. But let's forget that. What I want to know is, can you pack up your kister, go down there, and take charge of twenty-five acres that my Uncle Jeems Todd left me five years ago? Maybe the land is worth a large pile of heavy dough, if you cut it up into a subdivision and sell it by mail. Take along Windy Dana to do the publicity stuff, and if you two troupers

can't make the thing go I'll will it to the Patagonian government for a sanitarium."

"O. K.," I agrees. "Er—how do we split?"

"Fifty-fifty—and you can give Windy whatever he'll take."

Well, to whittle a long story, I got the deeds and blueprints from the boss, then went out to hunt up Windy Dana. He was considered to be the very best press agent in the circus world, and if the Brothers Grimm could write any better fairy tales than Windy I should like to read 'em. Honestly, he could convince a squirrel that brass nuts were good to eat, and hypnotize a bluefish into believing that angleworms were a deadly poison.

"Great!" enthuses Windy, after I had laid the deck on the table. "This will give me a chance to do some real high-class promotion stuff. Twenty-five acres, hey? Boy, let me at 'em! I'll get up a pip of a booklet describing the wonders of the joint, and let 'em slide through the mail. This ought to be the trombone's moan for a couple of troupers. When do we start?"

"We can get a train out of the Penn Station to-morrow afternoon—"

"Train be blowed! We go to Florida via motah. Everybody's doing it."

"Where did you get the Palm Beach accent?" I asks. "What's more, where did you promote the car?"

"It's a Mock Four, and it's all mine. Laid up in a garage for a few repairs, but it ought to be ready now. We'll take the sub and ride up and see about it."

When we reached the Supersmell Garage, Windy leads me up to a battered collection of rusty tin and begins to enthuse over its beauty.

"Nifty, what? This boat will shoot us down to Florida at forty miles per hour, if the flivvers don't clog up the road." He turns to the bandit who had just crawled from beneath the bus, and asks: "She ready?"

"Yeah—but I hadda put in new valves, stems, piston rings, four new gaskets, two rocker arms, a set of timing gears, and a—"

"It didn't need any jewelry, did it?" snorts Windy. "Don't kid me, fellah! When I brought it in you said all it needed was the valves ground and the carbon removed."

"Mebbe I did," replies the grease-smeared lad, "but you can't grind valves when they ain't in sight. Take it from me, mister, this scow was old when Columbus was young. You should ought to be glad that I kin fix it at all."

"How much?" demands Windy.

"Eighty-six dollars and ten cents—and believe me, I'm a liar if I make a nickel on the job!"

"What?" yelps Windy. "You must have been studying the life of Jesse James!"

"Them's my prices; I can't work for nothin'."

"I'll say you can't, fellah. Well, let's have it—but before I come here again I'll wreck it over a river bank!"

"You won't need no river bank, mister," says the jovial mechanic. "Just run it for awhile and you'll get the same results. If you want me to repair a automobile you gotta bring in a automobile. That used to be one. Come again, anyways."

"Go where you belong!" barked Windy, and steps on it.

The next morning we toss our kisters in the back of the wreck and start for Philadelphia, over Mr. Lincoln's well-known highway. Before reaching Newark, New Jersey—no joking—we have two successful blowouts. Settling with that mess, we start off again. It was a case of Florida or bust. And we arrived at Bust.

After covering about eighty of the ninety miles between New York and Philly, with no more trouble than a fly would have lifting the Woolworth Building on its left wing, a telegraph pole came off the side of the road and ran into us.

"Telegraph poles should learn how to drive," I remarks from my seat in the ditch.

"Guess the steering gear must have snapped," says Windy, with the windshield coiled around his neck.

"If this keeps up, the boss's Florida real estate will get rusty before we reach it," I hints.

"Don't worry, doc," he replies. "We're only ten miles from Philly now, and when we get there we can take passage on the Seasick and Dizzy Line for Jacksonville."

"What about the car?"

"I don't see any more car," he replies; and that was that.

Well, to come to the point, as the tack remarked to the balloon tire, we hailed a passing tourist, and arrived in Philly just in time to catch the S.S. Climate for Jacksonville. After landing at Jax, as the natives—from Ohio and Nebraska—coyly abbreviate it, we found that Moccasin City—the nearest town to the boss's real estate—was one hundred and ten miles farther down.

So we had to take a ride on a train, and went dashing toward Moccasin City at the terrific speed of twenty miles per hour. They have two kinds of turtles in Florida—one goes on four legs and sports a dinky tail, while the other runs on four wheels and sports a line of Fullmans behind it. Both get there eventually—but not now.

Well, sir—or lady—when me and Windy got our first glimpse of the old man's acreage I thought I'd cry, not that blubbering is my favorite indoor sport. A crow's eye view would show the following: Twenty-five acres of sand, cactus, and diamond studded swamps.

"So this is Florida!" I says, with a dull quack in my throat. "Must have rained a lot around here lately. Bet there's good fishing in the middle. What do you think about it, Windy?"

"Fine!" glows the dizzy boob. "All we got to do is to pump a little water out of the center, and we'll be sitting witty. Just think, we're just a few jungles off the Dixie Highway, and when we cut this stuff up into small mail-order lots the boys and girls up in the hinterlands will eat it like ice cream in August. I can already envision its beauty, if you ask me."

"Make a fine place for sharks to play hide and go seek in," I says, disgusted. "I bet a guy could make a good living from the fish alone. I never saw such a bloomer in my life. I feel like writing back to the boss and telling him that his dear Uncle Jeems Todd left him twenty-five acres of the Gulf of Mexico. I thought we was gonna collect some important money, and just look at the view!"

"Be your age!" laughs Windy. "Don't let a little water annoy you. We can peddle this goo by mail, and the guy who buys land via mail, sight unseen, deserves all he gets—which same is usually nothing. Meanwhile, we'll send a telegram to the old man, saying that we have discovered a body of water on his property and that we're naming it Lake Duffy, in his honor."

That evening we dispatched the following nifty:

> Plenty of water on acreage. Named it Lake Duffy.

Next morning we received this comeback:

> Thanks. But sell the lake.

During the rest of the week Windy worked like a stevedore, writing up a booklet to describe the beauties of the property. He burned the well-known midnight oil—meaning hotel electric lights—and finally finished one of the finest fairy tales ever tossed to a dumfounded world.

"Have a look at this," he says, passing me a copy. "I bet the late and genial Barnum couldn't have done any better."

"Or Captain Kidd, either," I admits, without even looking at it. "Although anything seems to get 'buy' in Florida, maybe this won't."

Well, after perusing the highly hokumed fla-fla, I begin to admire Windy. No fooling, he did a good job! To begin with, he names the swamps Rio Thanksgiving Estates.

Hot turkey—how's that?

"What d'yer mean, Thanksgiving?" I want to know.

"That's simple," he replies. "We give the Thanks, and they do the Giving. Cute?"

It was—until a sweet gal named Jane Jones came along. Speaking of Jane—Well, never mind; she can speak for herself. And she did!

But let's get back to Windy's puff about Rio Thanksgiving Estates. According to the tune, the R. T. Estates were no less

than the Paradise of Tropical America. Next, the Duffy National Realty and Improvement Company would undertake to sell, via mail, choice and fancy lots in their latest subdivision to the first persons who had the foresight—and the cash—to recognize its great possibilities.

Lots would be sold on easy payment plan—twenty-five bucks down and so much per month. Ten per cent discount for cash, of course. Sidewalks? Yes. Improved roads? Sure. Electric lights? No kidding. Near Dixie Highway? Absolutely. Windy must have slipped up there, because that was the truth.

Buy for permanent home or speculation. Land's bound to double in value within two weeks or less. Millions made in Florida real estate. (Sure, but Windy forgot to mention the millions lost.) Bear in mind, all wealth comes from soil. (And the suckers who buy said soil, hey?) Our property is near the beautiful St. Hoy River, and not far from the Gulf of Mexico. (Right—it looked like some of the Gulf was on it.) Boating, bathing, fishing, golf, *et cetera, et cetera,* and even *et cetera.* Best buy in Florida. Remembah, if you had invested in any first class Florida community when it was developing, you would be sitting pretty to-day. If you have the foresight to invest to-day, you will be sitting pretty tomorrow. (In the almshouse.) Make all checks payable to the Duffy National Realty and Improvement Company. And so on, and so off, whirled without end. Amen.

Well, that was the applied applesauce. The next thing was to get a mailing list from Vermont, Maine, or even Ohio would do, and shoot the booklets up North. All of which Windy eventually did, and so that was all settled.

"That's that," he says, after clogging up the innocent mails with five hundred of the gems. "Next, we build a neat little shack on the grounds for a land office, paint the thing red and green—showmanship, you know—stick a sign over the top reading "Duffy National Realty and Improvement Company," then hire a few colored lads to dig some trick sidewalks and quack roads around the—er—estates; and then we sit down and wait for the coin to roll in."

"Suppose the sheriff rolls in?" I asks.

"Let 'im roll; I'll sell 'im a couple of lots. His dough is as good as the next guy's. Don't worry about that, doc; we're just as legitimate as lots of these babies down here now. If they can get away with it, so can we."

But we didn't; and that's not another story—it's *this* one!

II.

Our first sales came in about two weeks later. The first was from a dear lady from Rural Center, Ohio, who sent in fifty dollars to apply on two lots; one came from a retired grocer—and thinker—of North Marion, Maine, while the last was from Mr. Heber Craw, of Salvation Falls, Vermont.

And thereby hangs the tale!

"Great!" enthuses Windy, slicing the envelopes. Post office money orders in every one. Bet we could have sold this land with a circular letter, instead of spending all that time and jack to get out the booklet. Folks just insist on buying land in Florida nowadays. I wonder how long has this been going on?"

Soon we were swamped with letters, asking a few questions concerning the great estates. Although half of the letters contained first payments on a lot, the other half wished to know what it was all about. Windy snorted as he answered the questions, and howled that he wished he had some one in the office to attend to the matter.

Here's a few samples of the questions, and the answers they got. Ques. Do you really think the land will double in value within a few weeks? Ans. You bet. It may triple. Ques. Any mosquitoes near property? Ans. What's a mosquito? Never heard of it down here. (Ha, ha!) Ques. Will the climate cure my rheumatism? Ans. Will cure even asthma and falling arches. Ques. What sort of vegetables can be raised on land? Ans. Most marvelous soil in United States. Will raise 'most anything!

Windy's last answer was too strong for me.

"That's a little raw, kid," I says. "You know that this cement and concrete won't raise anything but cactus and century plants.

"Well, if they can't raise anything else, let 'em raise hell," says he. "I'm here to sell the land, that's all. For all I know, it may be great soil to raise oysters and clams. But let's not worry about that. I wish you was a stenographer—I'm getting tired of pounding this rusty machine. Do you know anything about typewriters?"

"Only blondes," I says, which I thought was fair.

Before Windy could hurl the machine at my well shaped head, a lissom damsel steps lightly over the doorsill and looks timidly about.

"Pardon me," she says in a low, sweet voice, "but my name is Jane Jones, and I called to see if you could use an office assistant."

"Welcome!" beams Windy. "Take off your hat, sit down, and get busy. Your salary to start will be twenty-five a week, and about the same to finish. Are you pretty good on the typewriter?"

"Just fair," she replies. "You see, I didn't have a chance to finish my course, because papa was sick and I had to stay home most of the time and nurse him. That's how I happened to come to Florida—for papa's health."

Applesauce!

If we knew then what we know now, Jane Jones wouldst have been shipped out of that office via chained lightning. However, I'll have to admit that Jane was a very clever slice of girlhood, don't think she wasn't!

Four days after Jane's arrival our troubles commenced, although it wasn't Jane's fault.

It started to rain, and if you have never seen a Florida rainfall you haven't seen anything but a drizzle. Of course, we needed rain on our land like a polar bear needs a steam-heated flat; and when it laid off, three days later, we had enough water on Rio Thanksgiving Estates to run motorboat races.

Little by little and drop by drop, the dub-division began to resemble Lake Erie and the Panama Canal. Two hours before it stopped we had to build a raft to get to the office.

"Maybe we could turn this into a neat alligator farm," I suggests.

"Never mind the levity," snorts Windy. "Just try and think what our dear customers would say if they should see their land. It's a good thing we're peddling this bathing pool via mail, I'll tell the land-mad world!"

He no more than gets that out of his trap than a tall, sleuthy-looking lad wades through the water and steps into the office.

"How do you do?" he begins. "I presume that this is the office of the Rio Thanksgiving Estates? And that being the case, who is in charge of the development?"

"You may speak to me," says Windy, stepping forth.

"I will," says the stranger, yanking one of our spiffy booklets from his pocket.

"If it's about purchasing some of our highly desirable property," interrupts Windy, with what is known as a bland smile, "I shall be glad to show you around."

"It won't be necessary, thank you," replies the gangly gent. "I am from Tallahassee, which, as you may know, is the State capital of Florida."

I began to sniff a whole family of trouble!

"We have been reading your booklet with more or less interest," continues Mr. Tallahassee, "and we find that you have failed to mention the true conditions prevailing in your sub-division."

"Meaning what?" demands Windy.

"Meaning that you have stated that it is all high and dry land, which it is decidedly not. In fact, if you will look through the window, you will note that it is subject to—er—considerable moisture."

"Well, do you expect us to control the rain in this blooming State?" flares Windy, figuring that was a wise crack.

"Suppose we get down to business," snaps the State representative. "It is the desire of the State of Florida to protect the

investors in its land in so far as it is humanly possible to do so. And when you state that your property is high and dry, you are distributing a falsehood. In short, I am here to inform you that, unless you have the land drained, and drained permanently, we will not permit you longer to operate in the State. Do I make matters clear?"

"Quite," admits Windy, "and thanks for the information. We shall get busy at once and have the land drained."

Hot tropics—what a jolt! After the lad departed, me and Windy could have cut the gloom with a monkey-wrench—it was as thick as that.

"It will cost many pennies to get rid of all that dampness," moans Windy. "But maybe we can get away with it for a few weeks more; just long enough to peddle the last lot to the last sucker, then we can blow back to the merry land of genuine zero, where a guy can walk around without getting his socks filled with assorted sand fleas."

"Maybe we can and maybe we can't," I remarks, gloomily. "Anyhow, as Napoleon said, after escaping from Elba, let's try our luck."

Well, boys and girls, our next shipment of trouble arrived four days later from Heber Craw, of Salvation Falls, Vermont. Heber sends in a letter, saying that he has decided to flivver down and look over his lot, and that we could expect him within the next two weeks.

Tableau!

"Good night," croaks Windy, "we got to stall this hay-hoister off, or we'll land in a mess. Lemme think—lemme think. I got it! We'll send 'im a telegram!"

He dictates the following to Jane Jones:

> "Suggest you postpone coming for two weeks or more. Scarlet fever and malaria now raging in this part of State."

Next evening we get this reply from Mr. Heber Craw:

> **Glad it ain't smallpox. Had all the others. On my way.**

"Isn't that just too funny!" snickers Jane Jones.

"Yeah," says Windy, "like the Battle of Gettysburg to the guy who lost a leg. What does the half-wit want to come down for? He only bought one tiny lot, anyway."

"Maybe he wanted to see what Florida looks like," coos Miss Jones. "I know how *I* felt."

Whilst we're wondering what to tell the insistent Heber when he arrives, we begin to get a flock of letters from the other customers, saying that they have heard a rumor to the effect that their lots ain't strictly waterproof.

"Bet that bimbo from Tallahassee is in on this stuff!" snorts Windy. "We should have slipped him a few pennies, then he might have laid off."

"Don't think you could have bribed that baby," I says. "His head wasn't the right shape."

"Well, I guess we'll have to drain the damn place, after all," groans Windy.

"Guess we will," I agrees.

And the guess was right.

III.

Off and on—mostly on—during the next two weeks, it rained like confetti at the New Orleans Mardi Gras. And just when the flood was at its apex, Mr. Heber Craw had to flivver up in front of the office.

His Leaping Junk was covered with forty dollars worth of Georgia mud, and it was hard to say whether his wheels were artillery or disk. And here's a grief description of Heber: long, lanky, hardened and well-browned from the hay fields of Vermont.

"This bim looks easy to handle," says Windy, after a peek at the rube. "I'll take him like Coolidge took the White House!"

Windy wades out of the office and gives Heber a royal palm welcome. In fact, he near kills him with politeness.

"Well, well, well!" he opens up, "if it isn't Mr. Craw. We're so glad you came down to look us over. Come right in!"

Heber wriggles his ears, sniffs a coupla times, then takes a quail's eye view of our fishing banks.

"Glad to meetcher, mister," he finally drawls. "Thought I'd mosey down and

look things over. Jus' come for the ride, y' know. Meanwhile, I reckon I'll just have a look at my lot, seeing that I'm here."

"To be sure; to be sure," mumbles Windy. "But—er—ah—well, you see, we've had a little rain hereabouts lately, and the land is rather wet. But we're going to have it all drained, just as soon as we can. You know how it is in Florida, eh? Ha, ha!"

"Sure do," admits Heber, getting out of the car and landing in a foot of water. "But I don't mind a little water on my land—sorta irrigates it, I reckon."

"That's the spirit!" smiles Windy, slapping Heber on the back. "But don't worry about the water part, old man. As I said before, we're going to drain it as dry as the Gobi Desert. Yes, sir; we're going to set men to work on it in a short time."

"Wal, you don't have to drain it for *my* sake," replies Heber.

This unexpected reply near knocks me and Windy for a goal. Here we've been worrying what to tell Heber when he sees his lot, and when the clown gets here, he says the water is all right. Speaking of climate, what do you know about that?"

"But we got to drain it, anyway," pursues Windy. "The other buyers want it drained, and so we'll have to drain it all at the same time."

"Lissen, mister," says Heber, getting closer to Windy's ear," I guess you didn't hear me. I says I want my lot with the water on it, and I guess likely I mean what I say! Besides, I have brought the cash for the balance of the payments and if you'll just draw up a receipt, I'll hand over the cash."

Believing Heber was a nut of the first grade, Windy shoves him into the office, takes his money, and gives him a receipt in full.

"Now, jus' remember," says Heber, as he leaves, "I want my lot let alone. If you take any of that there water off it, I'll have you arrested for trespassing!" And he steps on the gas and plows down the road.

"A regular chump," says Windy, "and I don't mean maybe!"

"Must be all of that," I agrees.

Well, the next day, me and Windy leave the joint in charge of Miss Jones and go for a spin along Daytona Beach, the best highway in Florida, no fooling. When we get back to the office, we find Heber and Miss Jones sharing sandwiches together.

"Wal, how's everything to-day?" asks Heber.

"Lovely," says Windy. "We have just made arrangements with the contractors to drain the property, but they can't start work until the embargo is lifted. You see, their dredges have got to be shipped from Jacksonville and—"

"Say, you ain't gonna take away my water, are you?" demands the hick.

"Certainly," laughs Windy. "We know you're only fooling about that water stuff. We can't drain the other buyers' land without draining yours, too."

"I ain't botherin' none about the other buyers," replies Heber. "I'm jus' speakin' for my *own* lot. And if you touch my property, I'll sue you for damages. Tha's all I gotta say, mister." After which, Mr. Craw slams on his cornfield fedora and breezes out of the place.

"If he ain't crazy, who is?" demands Windy, of nobody in particular. "What's he want with the water—use it for a private bathtub?"

"I ain't no medium," I says. "But I know this much: if we don't drain the dump damn soon the other customers will be down on our heads like plaster off a old ceiling. And we can't drain the other land without draining his, too. Besides, the first thing you know, that bird from Tallahassee will be dropping in on us again, and I feel that it will be the last time he'll call. After that, blooey for Rio Thanksgiving Estates!"

Sure enough, two days later, Mr. Tallahassee comes snooping around again.

"Gentlemen," he begins without any ceremony, "I regret to say that, unless this property is thoroughly drained within the next two weeks, I shall be obliged to take you to Tallahassee, and let the courts continue with the matter. We have received several complaints from the purchasers, and we cannot permit you to state that your land is high and dry when it is not."

"For the love of Miami," yelps Windy, "give us a chance, can't you? We have already made arrangements with a firm of contractors to drain the property, but the embargo prevents them from getting to work."

"That embargo plea is just a bit overworked nowadays," says the snappy investigator. "You have two weeks to get busy, and that's that!" And out goes the lad.

"Well," remarks Windy, "I guess we picked a winner, eh? Hell—it'll cost us a fortune to drain this ocean, and there goes the profits!"

"All of which is better than spending a vacation in the Tallahassee hoosegow, ain't it?" I offers as consolation.

Well, to come to the end of a perfect fray, a week later the first draining implements arrive from the Aqua Turtle Drainage Company, Limited. Except in prices. There was no limit to that! Twenty minutes later appears Mr. Heber Craw, of Salvation Falls, Vermont.

"Hello," greets Windy. "Mr. Craw, you're just in time to watch us drain the property."

"Not my lot, you won't!" snaps Heber, like he actually meant it.

"You must be joking," goes on Windy. "You know darn well that we can't drain the rest of the land without also draining yours. Your lot is right in the middle!"

"Don't care nothin' about that. I have seen a lawyer and he says you ain't got no right to touch my land without my permission!"

At that point, I began to see the light! And so do you. Of course, we should have seen what Heber was after, long ago, but being sure we were wise showmen, we thought we couldn't lose on *anything*.

"All right!" says Windy. "I got you, fellah. I admit you're good, and we're the boobs. Now, let's get down to business. We can't drain the land without draining yours with it, and so we'll have to buy back your land. That's your ace in the hole, isn't it?"

"Mebbe I don't want to sell it," edges Heber.

Well, of course, you can see the end without even looking. After arguing back and so forth for a full hour, with Windy nearly slapping Heber through the window, we are obliged to buy back his lot—at a profit of two thousand bucks to Mr. Craw.

"Now, get out before I knock you out!" roars Windy, advancing toward Heber.

Just then we get a sweet shock.

"Don't you *dare* touch my husband—you—you—crook!" screeches Jane Jones.

Husband? Hot curling irons—just imagine that!

"What d' yer mean—husband?" I yelps, blinking my surprise. Windy has lost his tongue entirely, not that I blame 'im!

"Thought you was smart, eh?" she jeers. "Well, just to save you wise little boys from doing a lot of guessing, I'll explain matters before we leave. To begin with, Heber bought a lot from you while I was away visiting my aunt in the next town. When I heard what he did, I knew there was something wrong about it, so I decided to come down and investigate. Luckily, I got a job with you, which was more than I had hoped for.

"And when you sent Heber a telegram not to come to Florida, I sent a counter telegram, saying that he shouldn't believe you. Then I sent him a long letter, explaining about the draining of the land, and told him to come down and buy the lot outright, for cash. That would make him the sole owner, and—well, I guess that's all I need to explain—unless you're dumber than I thought you were.

"Oh, yes! It was I who sent an anonymous letter to Tallahassee and told them about things down here, and it was I, also who wrote to ten of the buyers, and told them to write to Tallahassee, and explain that they had bought land that was under water. Now, is everything plain?"

"Well, you—you—darn hicks!" bellers Windy, red as a crate of tomatoes.

"Hicks?" retorts Heber, encircling his arm around Jane Jones. "Say, mister, when a feller buys a lot for a coupla hundred dollars, then sells it right back to the feller he *bought* it from—well, *who's* the hicks?"

No wonder Jesse James never lived in Vermont!

THE END

Prairie Shock

By JOHN HOLDEN

Author of "Six-Day Glory," "Working Up from Nowhere," etc.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE BANK.

NANCY CARROLL caught her breath. "You're sure you can put the money in the bank to meet my checks?" she exclaimed.

"Positive."

"If you don't, I'll be jailed for issuing them. I suppose you know that?"

"I do."

"Very well, then, I'll trust you." She turned to the superintendent. "Thanks for your offer, Mr. Crippen, but I've made other arrangements. The men will be paid in the regular manner."

Crippen was doubtful. "You said you had no money in the bank."

"It'll be there by the time the checks are turned in for payment."

Nancy sat down at her desk, and commenced to write. The quitters looked doubtfully at one another, and at the checks when they received them; but there was no legitimate protest that they could make, since it was by check that the workers all along the line were paid.

"If these ain't good—" one of them began threateningly, but Hancock cut him off.

"I know you've had to wait awhile, but don't forget you're leaving us short-handed. Good-by and good luck."

Outside the office, the men stood around for awhile; then, with their bundles or grips on their backs, started for the village, while the men who remained watched them.

Crippen said to Nancy: "I suppose that since this foreman of yours is helping you out with cash, you won't listen to my advice to replace him?"

Nancy smiled for the first time in many hours. "You hardly expect me to, do you?"

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 3.

Crippen turned to Hancock. "I hope you'll have the decency to quit when you find you can't swing the job."

"I certainly shall, if I can't. But I'm going to fool you by swinging it to your satisfaction as well as Miss Carroll's."

"I hope so. But first of all—where are you going to get another machine crew?"

"From you, I hope."

"I haven't one available. Could get one from St. Paul, of course, but that would take a week. You'll have to find one somewhere on the line."

"Then I shall—right here in the camp maybe."

Hancock went to the door, and called Blackie, who was loafing around the yard with the other men.

"Blackie," he said, "didn't you keep repeating in the bunk house what a fine mule-skinner you are?"

The fellow looked embarrassed.

"I—I guess I can handle them all right," he admitted. "Why?"

"Handle four teams? A real mule-skinner can always do that, I've been told."

"I guess so."

"Good. I've got a new job for you. Driving the four teams that pull the grading machine."

Blackie gasped. "Holy cat, no! Why, that—that's an awful big job. Responsible. I don't want responsibility."

"Why not?"

The fellow looked around as though seeking an avenue of escape, while Crippen grinned and even Nancy looked amused.

"I—I just don't want to. Gosh, no! Couldn't up and quit whenever I liked—not without tying up the job. Honest! I wasn't cut out for any such place as that."

"There's more money in it."

"Yes, I know, but—gosh, no!"

Hancock frowned. "You're a bluffer, Blackie. Not a mule-skinner at all. Just a teamster, like any city kid. I'm surprised though, because I thought you were the real thing."

Blackie bridled. "I am. I can handle four, six, any number of teams. A darned sight better than the dub who quit, if it comes to that."

Hancock gave him a slap on the back. "That settles it. You're the new machine driver. Now who shall we get to work the elevator? McNaughton? Do you want him for one of your crew?"

Blackie, looking resigned to his fate, considered. "Yeah, Mac is a good worker, old as he is. Then there's another good man named—"

In two minutes the crew was selected, and Hancock sent Blackie out to hitch up the mules and get the grader going.

"All I need now is some teamsters to replace these fellows, and a few shovel men, and we'll make the dirt fly," he said. "Got any idea where I can get them, Mr. Crippen?"

"Yes. A foreman was telling me only this morning that he'd have to let some good teamsters go." The superintendent telephoned one of the camps; then told Hancock that if he would drive six miles up the line, he could bring the men back in the car.

"I'll do that," volunteered Nancy. "The ones that can't sit inside can stand on the running board."

She left at once, and Hancock helped Blackie to get the big machine going. Already the little mule-skinner seemed to be enjoying his new importance and responsibility. McNaughton and the third man helped him with alacrity; in fact a new spirit of willingness seemed to have seized all the men.

The new hands arrived late in the afternoon, and immediately went to work; so that at six o'clock Hancock had the satisfaction of seeing the job progressing as well as it had with the old crew, with every prospect of big improvement in another day or two.

"Not so bad," said Crippen, who had remained to watch Hancock's efforts with growing interest. "I apologize for what I said about you being a green city man."

"No need to," replied the foreman. "That's what I am; but pep is what is needed mostly on this job—that's how Graham succeeds—and a green man is just as likely to have pep as any one else."

Crippen left, and, somewhat to Hancock's dismay, he was left alone with Nancy. He feared the questions she would be sure to

ask; so, in an effort to head off some of them, he spoke of the matter that he knew was first in her thoughts.

"I'm terribly sorry, Nancy, that I worried you so much before I made my offer to meet your checks. I'm afraid that I can't explain all the circumstances of the case now, but really, if you knew them, I don't think you would blame me."

"I'm too grateful for your assistance even to think of asking questions," she responded. "The only thing that worries me now is—are you sure you can put up the money without placing yourself in a bad position?"

"Oh, yes."

He told her that he intended to take the first available train to Great Falls, where her bank was located, which would be early next morning. She asked if he could not make the deposit by mail. That did not suit his plan at all; so Hancock had to claim additional business in the city.

"Some of your checks will probably reach the bank to-morrow," he remarked, "but I'll get there first."

Even as he said this he winced at the thought that something might occur to delay him, in which case she would get into serious trouble for issuing worthless paper.

He made no mention of the package in her safe that evening, but next morning, when both of them were in the office soon after daylight, and his arrangements for driving to the village were about completed, he remarked in as casual a tone as he could muster:

"By the way, since I'm going to the city, I think I'll take along that package you've been keeping for me."

Nancy opened the safe, and Hancock's hand trembled when he took the package from her. If only she knew what was inside! Would she consider him a murderer because he possessed it? Surely not. But he was sure that the sheriff, and almost every one else would.

After breakfast Hancock drove to the village, and boarded a train that would land him in the city shortly after the bank opened for business. He wired ahead for a hotel room, and when the train reached its destination on time—greatly to Hancock's relief because it was often late—he went directly to the hotel room, and after closing the transom and locking the door, unwrapped the package. Now for the task of extracting from it such bank notes as could not be identified.

There were many fresh new notes, just as the sheriff had stated; and, since they must be the ones that the Maverick cashier had particularly noted, he laid them aside and counted the worn notes to the amount of five hundred dollars, which was sufficient to meet Nancy's checks. He added another two hundred, since she might be compelled to pay off other men before the end of the month; then he rewrapped the remaining bills in heavy brown paper which he had secured for the purpose, taking care this time not to make the package the exact size of a bank note.

With the loose notes in one pocket, and the package in another, he left the hotel and walked to the bank, arriving only a few minutes after it opened.

Inside the place, Hancock experienced a fresh surge of the fear that had been haunting him ever since he told Nancy he could raise the necessary cash. What if one of the worn bank notes that he was about to deposit should be recognized as the property of the murdered man?

The sheriff might have been mistaken when he stated, by inference at least, that only the fresh new ones could be identified. However, it was too late now to reconsider his decision; Nancy's checks must be met or she would go to jail. Hancock made out the necessary deposit slip, and stepped up to the receiving teller's window.

The man took the cash and the slip without comment, counted the bills, and placed them in a drawer, entered the amount in Nancy's book, and returned it. Hancock pocketed the book, and walked out.

What a relief! And it had been so easy, too. He was ashamed of himself now for having dreaded that moment. He returned to his hotel, and considered another decision he must make.

Should he leave the money package, which still contained thirteen hundred dollars, in some safe-deposit box in the city, or carry it back to the camp? Danger

lurked in either direction. Danger if he left it in the city, since he might be called upon at any time to disclose the contents of a package that he was so careful of; danger if he asked Nancy to keep it for him again, since she might ask awkward questions.

It would be better in one way to keep it close at hand, since he might want to make use of it at any time—to catch the murderer, possibly. He could, of course, bury it somewhere near the camp. But, as before, such action appeared clumsy and messy, dangerous, too, since he might be seen. He decided finally to carry the package back to the camp, and in the afternoon he returned to the village on the train.

Not for one moment did he forget that the money did not belong to him, that he should have returned it long before to the dead man's estate. The fact worried him greatly.

But he found excuses for his action. In the first place, he had put the money in Nancy's safe before he knew to whom it belonged. Then he had to consider that even the anonymous return of it might incriminate him; and finally he had hoped, by retaining it, to attract the murderer so that the latter might be captured.

Now he could not return the money for the simple reason that he no longer possessed all of it. He decided that, if nothing happened by the time that Nancy repaid him, he would send the two thousand dollars anonymously to the authorities, taking great care that it could not be traced, and wash his hands of the whole worrying business.

He would have to think up lies to tell Nancy, in case she became too insistent in her questioning as to where he had got the seven hundred dollars; and that was another disagreeable, but necessary feature of the affair.

In time, however—possibly when the murderer was convicted and all possibility of the crime being fastened on him was removed—he would tell her the whole truth. Then she would be grateful for the risk he had run, and love him all the more for it; and together they would laugh over the dangers and difficulties they had surmounted in their fight to make the camp pay.

For, of course, it would pay. With Pingree and the malcontents removed, Hancock did not doubt that for a moment. Possibly Blackie was not the best man to set the pace and would have to be replaced, but even so, a good pacemaker would surely be procurable somewhere.

At the village, Hancock found the car where he had left it, and returned to the camp.

He assured Nancy at once that her checks had been met, and she told him in return that all day the work had been progressing quite favorably. Blackie had taken hold with amazing verve, and all the others had followed his lead.

"I'm so happy I could almost cry," she told him. "After that awful situation I was in, everything looks lovely. And it's all due to you. I'd be sold out now—lock, stock, and barrel, as the old-timers say—if you hadn't come to the rescue."

She gave Hancock the safe combination, saying he would need it as much as she; and without making any comment, he placed in it the money package.

They went for a walk in the evening, and, from the vantage point of the hillside, listened to the men contesting horseshoe-pitching matches in a more joyous mood than they had ever shown previously. A new spirit seemed to pervade the camp.

The men seemed to feel, as did Nancy and Hancock, that the work would now proceed without annoying hitches, that money troubles were a thing of the past, that, after all, the Carroll camp was a pretty good place in which to be.

The following morning was as full of promise as the evening had been. The weather was ideal for work, two flunkys in the kitchen served the usual well-cooked breakfast hot, as it should be served, the men went singing to their work, Blackie drove his four teams without the time-wasting halts that had characterized the previous driver.

And then, as Nancy was looking through the mail that had been brought from the village, Hancock suddenly saw her start, and stare at a letter that she had just opened. She handed it to him with the remark: "What does that mean?"

It was an anonymous letter, crudely lettered in a disguised hand, and it contained the following words:

Ask your foreman where he got the money.

CHAPTER XV.

A FLASH LIGHT AT MIDNIGHT.

IN the few seconds that followed his reading of the anonymous letter, Hancock did as rapid a bit of thinking as he ever had done in all his life. He must tell Nancy something. That was as plain as the writer's inference that he had not secured the money in a regular and proper manner. What, then, should he tell her? A lie, as he had tentatively decided, or the truth?

Swiftly he reviewed the merits of the two alternatives. He could make a lie plausible, he felt sure, and, until such time as the murderer was caught, it would shield him from the dreadful possibility that Nancy might not believe his true story. On the other hand, should she ever discover that he had lied to her, all the love and confidence that he had gained might be swept away forever.

"Who in the world could have written this?" Nancy exclaimed.

She did not seem to think that the letter was a matter of great importance, however, and for a moment Hancock thought that perhaps he could escape without telling any story at all.

"Haven't the slightest idea," he replied.

It was true that he had not, and the uncertainty was a new source of worry. If some one suspected that, because he had come through Maverick on the night of the tragedy, he might have secured the missing money, that person might communicate his suspicion to the authorities; and then where would he be?

"Whoever he is, he seems to think it's important that I should ask you the question he suggests." Nancy smiled in the tolerant manner of one who indulges another's whim. "Therefore, to ease my unknown correspondent's mind, I will ask it: Where, Mr. Crœsus, did you get that cash?"

Hancock took a deep breath.

"I'll tell you," he decided. "I'll tell you the truest story that you ever heard. But please be prepared for a bit of a shock, and please have as much faith in me as you can; because it may not sound true."

Nancy started and stood staring at him, her smile gone, her countenance very pale.

"Harry!" she cried. "What's wrong?"

Hancock tried to smile.

"Nothing, I hope. Just be prepared to hear a strange tale. And don't disbelieve me—please. Life will hardly be worth living if you do."

"My dear! What is it? Tell me quickly."

"Very well."

For a long time he talked. He began with his ride on the work-car before the train reached Maverick, and he omitted no detail. He told the girl he loved the whole truth and nothing else, and not only what he had done, but what he had felt and feared and hoped.

He did not know how she was receiving his tale. At times he felt sure that she believed; at other points in his narrative he was doubtful. The truth, in places, seemed far-fetched. The thought occurred to him that if he were making up the story out of whole cloth he could tell it more plausibly. But he was resolved not to permit even the shadow of an untruth to color the narrative. He finished at last, and looked at her.

She seized his hand, and held it tightly.

"My dear, dear boy—and you thought that I could doubt you!"

Hancock's heart leaped.

"You don't?"

"Of course not. I didn't think of doubting even one single word of your story. But the risk you took when you lent me the money! How could you have done it—even for me?"

They were alone. Hancock drew her toward him and kissed her.

"I'd take any risk for you, my sweet."

Her perturbation grew.

"Well, you've done it. Oh, my God, Harry, you've done it! This man, this letter writer—he suspects. He'll put the authorities on your trail. And then—how can you convince them?"

Hancock tried to look cheerful.

"You believed the true story, so why shouldn't they?"

She was becoming almost hysterical in her alarm.

"You're the man I love. I understand you. I knew you spoke the truth—felt it—intuition told me. But they—the sheriff, the law—they don't love you, don't understand, don't want to believe.

"The law wants to disbelieve, because then they'll have some one to try for the murder. Don't you see? Oh, God help us!" She choked back sobs. "They'll arrest you sure. They'll fling you into some dirty little jail. And how can you convince them that your story is true, that you're innocent? You can't, can't, can't!"

Hancock took her hands and held them.

"Hush, dear. Don't look at the dark side. I can tell them all that happened in the movie theater, and they'll surely believe I was there. It's impossible that an innocent man should actually be convicted of a crime he didn't commit. Just a short while ago, I was afraid that one might be, but I got over it.

"Besides, nobody suspects me—not really. This letter is just a shot in the dark, written by Pingree or one of the quitters. The writer doesn't really know anything; just thought he could alarm you and cause you to doubt me. Please don't pay any attention to it. I'm not going to. Anonymous letters should never alarm any one."

With an effort Nancy controlled herself.

"Perhaps you're right."

"I'm sure I am."

"I'll try to convince myself that you are. Shouldn't trouble trouble, I suppose, until it troubles us."

"That's the way to talk. Come on out to the grade with me. The sunshine, the way the work is getting done—it will cheer you up."

They walked to the scene of operations, and sure enough, found things progressing even more favorably than they had expected. Steadily, the four teams, under the skillful guidance of Blackie, pulled the grader along; steadily the dirt carrier filled the stream of wagons that drove up.

Farther down the line the great mound of earth was stretching out like some growing monster. No one was loafing, no one was overworked. Hancock occasionally asked for suggestions as he went among the men, and the latter, knowing that their opinions would be respected, were quick to respond.

Some of the ideas were fantastic and impractical, in which case Hancock pointed out the fact to the suggestor; but others seemed sensible, and he promised to look into them.

The sun rose in the clear sky, but a cool, sweet, prairie breeze tempered its heat. Noon came, and the men enjoyed a good meal and an hour of rest. The afternoon progressed as had the morning, and when evening came any one could see that more than the usual amount of dirt had been moved.

Thus did the job progress, day after day. Superintendent Crippen expressed his surprise and gratification, was profuse in his apologies to Hancock for having doubted his ability. The resident engineer was pleased also. He made a rough estimate of the cubic yards of dirt moved, and stated that, when he made an accurate measurement with instruments at the end of the month, the yardage would undoubtedly prove large.

From his figures Nancy and Hancock estimated the amount of money she could expect to receive as an advance, and rejoiced together because it promised to set them both on their feet. Hancock could replace in the package the seven hundred dollars taken from it; Nancy would be able to repay some of the debt she owed on the outfit.

They decided that, if no clew to the murderer appeared by the end of the month, the money package, restored as to contents, should be returned to the dead man's estate. Hancock wanted to return it openly, with a full statement to the authorities of all that had occurred, but Nancy was firmly against that plan.

Since no clew could be supplied, she argued, it was unnecessary. Because he had not returned it before, he would be severely criticized at the very least, and more likely

placed in a position of danger. They decided, therefore, to return it anonymously, and tried for the time being to put the whole business out of their minds.

As day succeeded day and nothing happened, Hancock's apprehension that the deposited bank notes would be identified and traced to him faded away. His fear of the anonymous letter writer subsided also; the letter must surely have been a chance shot.

He hoped now that the murderer would not come to him and demand the package. If the man did, he would, of course, endeavor to capture him, and earn the reward that had been offered. But he was not so keen about the reward now, since his salary as foreman made it possible to save money rapidly; and he did not relish a fight with a desperate criminal. What he wanted was to forget the Maverick tragedy; get rid of the money package, and think no more about it. He had a better use nowadays for both his mental and physical energy.

Both he and Nancy were beginning now really to like the free life of the camp. Hancock, in particular, did not see how he could ever again endure clerical employment in a cramped and stuffy city office. Out here on the prairie he had found his *metier*, the business which promised him the greatest chance of achieving real success.

The profits of successful railroad contracting were great, and he was revealing a flair for camp management that was as surprising to himself as to every one else. There was a happy mean between a driving attitude and an easy-going one that, for him, yielded the best results. His men liked him and did not mind doing hard work for him, and he in turn did all he could to make them comfortable and contented.

It was about a week after his confession to Nancy that he retired one night as usual. He had got into the habit of reading in bed before he went to sleep, and now, after tucking himself in comfortably, he lay there with a new book in his hand that he had just secured from the city.

He read by the light of a lamp that stood on a small table at the head of his bed. The table had a drawer, and in this drawer he had placed the automatic pistol that he still possessed. He had quit keeping it under his mattress. It seemed quite close enough in the drawer.

He blew out the light at eleven thirty o'clock, and lay for awhile wide awake.

His room was at the rear of the combined storehouse and office building. It was a long building, and the office, with Nancy's room adjoining, was at the front end. There was one window in his room, and, since the night was warm, he left it open.

It was a noiseless night, with not even a breeze to stir things into motion. All that he could hear was the intermittent gnawing of a mouse somewhere in the warehouse. When that let up for a moment, the silence wrapped him round as though in a great luxurious blanket, a soothing silence that eased all the pain and anxiety that still beset him at times.

How different from the city, he thought, which is never entirely silent, not even in the first slow-pulsed hours of the morning. Yes, the prairie was the place where one could lead a normal life once one dismissed the false notion that a prairie dweller is isolated from the conveniences of civilization.

How absurd that idea was. Take, for instance, that book he had been reading, one of the very latest. Yes, the prairie was the place to live, so peaceful, soothing, quiet, restful—

A moving disk of light caught Hancock's eye. He realized that he had been asleep, had been jerked out of unconsciousness in some inexplicable manner by that darting beam. Not a sound reached his ears, the silence seemed more abysmal even than before, but there was that eerie shaft of light cutting the darkness like a magic sword, moving here and there on the walls and on the floor. About the size of a dinner plate it was, sometimes larger, sometimes smaller—a weird token of danger, soundless, restless, incredibly swift.

A flash light! Some one else was in the room. The murderer, perhaps; the fiend who had slain for a mere bundle of money; the man he once had hoped to meet and then had given up the desire to meet. He reached a stealthy hand toward the drawer in the table. How unwise it had been to

put the pistol there instead of under the mattress or pillow where he once had kept it. The light darted straight to his eyes, blinding him with its concentrated glare.

"Put 'em up!" hissed a voice. "Do what you're told, or you're a dead man."

In full possession of his faculties now, Hancock realized that it would be useless to disobey. He could not get his gun from the drawer quickly enough to use it. He put up his hands, resting his elbows on the bed, and lay quietly awaiting the next move on the intruder's part.

"What's the idea?" he asked, as calmly as he could.

"You have the money," came a tense and precise voice, "that a man in Maverick was murdered for."

"What makes you think so?" Hancock was trying to get a glimpse of his unknown visitor, but it was quite impossible. The steady glare of the light was so blinding that he could see nothing beyond it. Nor was the voice familiar.

"You used part of it to help the girl—but never mind how I know. Your job is to get what's left, and give it to me right now, then get the missing part that you stole, to-morrow."

"Stole?" said Hancock. "That's a good word for you to use. I suppose it was you that killed the real owner."

The voice became lower, and more menacing. "In case you think this is a joke—I did. Didn't mean to, and that's why I got rid of the dough when I thought a cop was trailing me back to the car. There's good reasons why I ain't called for it before—but never mind!

"All you got to do right now is give me what cash is left and give it to me damn quick, or there'll be another killing."

Hancock did not doubt that the man was in earnest, that his life was in danger. Nevertheless, here was the chance he had been hoping for, and he should not let it go without trying to effect a capture. If he could keep up the conversation he might be able to distract the man's attention sufficiently to get his hand on the gun in his drawer; then their chances would be equal.

"What makes you think I've got the remaining cash in this room?" he asked.

From the corner of his eye he glanced toward the table beside the bed, which was revealed now and then as the circle of light moved slightly from side to side. He spread out his raised hands a little so that the light could not cover both at the same time.

"You got it in the safe," said the voice. "You're going to go there, and get it right now."

"How can I if I haven't got the combination?" Hancock was not reluctant to go to the safe since it might give him the chance he was looking for, but he wanted to continue talking.

"You've got it all right. Roll out now, and put on your socks. They'll be all the clothes you need. And don't wake the girl when you reach the office—not unless you want her to get a lead pill as well as yourself."

Hancock caught his breath. His predicament was much worse than he had realized. How could he enter the office without waking Nancy, who slept right next to it? She was unarmed, and could do nothing but endanger her life and his.

"Wait!" The command halted Hancock as he started to get out of bed on the side nearest the table. "Just to show you that you'd better not try to start anything, look at this." Into the light came the man's right hand, holding a pistol. It was jerked back into the darkness at once, but Hancock had time to notice that the hand was a small one, soiled, but not misshapen or grimy as a genuine laborer's is likely to be. He inferred, therefore, that the man was not large in size, and might be vanquished in a purely physical struggle.

The unknown's next remark dissipated much of his hope, however.

"In case there's something in that table drawer you'd like to have, I'll get it out of your way." The man drew it toward him, with his foot Hancock thought, all the while keeping the light and doubtless the pistol trained as before; then he commanded Hancock to get up, and go out the door.

"Creep around to the office, unlock the door, go inside and open the safe," he ordered. "I'll be two steps behind you with the gat trained on your back; so don't make any false move."

"Can't open the safe if I can't see the dial," protested Hancock.

"I'll fix that. Now! Put on your socks."

The man moved back so that the flash light threw a bigger circle of light. Hancock picked up his socks from the floor, and, sitting up in bed, pulled them on.

"Wait a minute," he protested. "What do you mean—give you the missing amount to-morrow? I can't raise any money to-morrow."

"You can. The end of the month is almost here. The girl can get the cash if she wants to badly enough. Just to give you every chance, though, make it day after to-morrow. Then what you're to do is this: take the cash at night and go alone to Trapper's Trail, which starts six miles north of here and leads up into the mountains.

"Walk one mile up the trail to a deserted cabin that you'll find in the little clearing on the right side, and put the money in an empty can that you'll find on the table. Then walk right out, and return the way you came.

"Don't try any tricks like telling the sheriff to watch for me, and don't fail to do exactly what I say. If you do, you're simply going to keel over some day with a bullet in you from a rifle hidden half a mile away. Now is that all straight?"

Hancock still sat on his bed.

"Be reasonable," he begged. "Crippen may refuse to give Miss Carroll a cent. And there's no other possible way I can get it."

"Stand up!" The voice rasped like a knife on stone. "Not another word. Get the package. Take the office door key. It's in your pants pocket."

Hancock procured the key and started toward the door. But as his hand touched the knob he was halted again. He heard the man pull out the table drawer and chuckle profanely as he took possession of the pistol.

"Go on!"

Outside, Hancock crept through the darkness along the side of the warehouse toward the office. He hoped and prayed that he might not waken Nancy. The flash light held on his back occasionally shot a stray pencil of light past and ahead of him.

He reached the office door without incident, and opened it as noiselessly as he could. He stood still for a few silent seconds, cupping his hand behind his ear, dreading to hear sounds indicative of Nancy's wakefulness; then at another whispered command he tiptoed across the familiar floor toward the safe.

With the light from behind thrown on the dial, Hancock turned the knob, swung it open, and took out the money package. The wrapper crackled in his hand, and his heart skipped a beat when he fancied that he heard a sound from Nancy's adjoining bedroom. He closed the safe door and crept back to the office door, however, without incident.

"Back to your room!"

Presently they gained that point of comparative safety, and Hancock breathed more freely.

The intruder tore a corner off the wrapper to verify its contents.

"I don't know how much you took out, but whatever the amount is short of two thousand dollars, that's it," he said. He added a recapitulation of his orders: "Night after to-morrow night—deserted cabin one mile up Trapper's Trail—God help you if you fail to show up."

"I understand," said Hancock.

"Now shut that window."

Hancock turned to do so, and immediately felt a crashing blow on his head. He fell and lay on the floor, stunned for the moment, but not entirely unconscious. Slowly he regained his feet and lurched to his bed. He knew what had happened. The murderer had felled him with the butt of the pistol in order to keep him from pursuing him, also perhaps in order to demonstrate his ruthlessness.

In a moment Hancock rose and staggered to the door. He listened for footsteps or the sound of horse's hoofs or the noise of a motor. But he heard nothing whatsoever, not even when he went outside and lay flat with his ear to the ground. He rose, somewhat recovered, and hurried out into the yard, listening at intervals and trying to peer through the darkness, but all in vain.

The thought that the self-confessed killer might be one of his own men came to him, and he started for the bunk house.

CHAPTER XVI.

NANCY'S DECISION.

THE stubbing of his toe just before he reached the bunk house caused Hancock to realize that he was still clad only in pyjamas and socks. What if any one should see him prowling around in that attire near the office, especially if the observer were one of the nasty-minded persons of which the camp had its full quota? Was it possible that his name might be connected with Nancy's in a scandalous manner?

He could not explain his business except by telling all about the unknown man's visit, and that would entail further explanations that he could not afford to make. He wanted to go to the bunk house at once, since it was possible that the criminal was one of his own men and was now lying in bed there; but he decided that he must take the time to dress more conventionally, and therefore returned to his room.

In five minutes he was out again, properly dressed and more fully recovered from the stunning blow. At the bunk house door he removed his shoes and crept inside, and, standing beside one bunk after another, listened to the breathing of the different men.

So far as he could tell, all of them were sound asleep. A whispered "Who's there?" dispelled that belief, however. He hurried to the side of the questioner, and found that the man was Gloomy Gus.

"It's I—Hancock. Say, have you been awake long?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Hear any one enter just a little while ago?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

"Hear any running footsteps in the yard?"

"None except yours—walking."

Hancock reflected that he did not know Gloomy any too well, and the fellow might be lying. His unknown visitor's knowledge of camp conditions had been so accurate and comprehensive that Hancock could not understand how he could have gained it outside the camp.

There had been no sounds to indicate flight; therefore Hancock still clung to the theory that the man might be right there in one of the bunks. Maybe Gloomy was he!

Reaching for the lantern that hung on the wall, Hancock lighted it and looked first at Gloomy—not at his features so much as at his right hand, which lay outside the cover. No, that was not the hand that had come forward into the circle of light clasped around a pistol butt.

"Keep still," he told Gloomy. "I'm investigating something."

At one after another of the lower-tier bunks Hancock stopped to look at the right hand of the occupant. Sometimes the hand had to be uncovered, sometimes he awakened the sleeper and had to warn him to keep quiet.

The lower tier revealed nothing, and Hancock began on the upper one. This was an awkward job, but he stuck to his task until he had examined every right hand in the bunk house. None matched the Maverick murderer's.

"Sorry to have awakened you, men," he apologized to the few who lay looking at him with puzzled eyes. He blew out the light and left, carrying the lantern with him.

Inside the stable he relighted it and looked into every nook and corner where a man, especially an undersized one, might lay hidden; then he made the rounds of the yard, looking everywhere and listening.

Near the roadway he stopped with an exclamation. There on the ground lay his pistol, loaded and uninjured, evidently thrown away by the intruder as he was about to leave the yard. Hancock picked it up and carried it back to his room, and there sat pondering.

The visitor, despite the fact that he knew the package was in the safe and that Hancock possessed the combination, was evi-

dently not a member of the camp crew. How, then, could he have secured his information? Possibly from a friend in the camp.

Hancock concluded presently that he could make no headway toward establishing the man's identity that night; so he dropped the problem for the time being, along with several minor ones such as the man's reason for not molesting him before, and turned his thoughts toward the more urgent question of what he should do on the morrow.

The visitor had given him only two days in which to raise seven hundred dollars, and he did not doubt that the man was in deadly earnest. Should he ask Nancy to beg the money from Crippen, as had been suggested? Certainly that was his only chance to get it—a pretty good chance, he thought, since Crippen had appreciated the progress made, and the end of the month was almost at hand. In case the money could be secured, would it not be best to deliver it as ordered and wash his hands of the whole tragedy?

The difficulty was Hancock could not be sure even then that the Maverick murder would be off his hands. It might still become known to the authorities that he possessed the money package. He would be arrested, and his defense would be weaker even than it was now, because he could not prove that he had delivered the two thousand dollars to the murderer. His story of the demand and his compliance would sound wild and improbable. The State would claim that his failure to notify the authorities and thus give them a chance to capture the man was evidence that such a man had never existed.

On the other hand, if he told his story to the sheriff, the latter might capture or kill the criminal, and thus put an end to the whole embarrassing business. Even if it were only proved that the criminal existed, the lacking element of plausibility would be added to Hancock's story, and he would be held blameless for the Maverick tragedy.

There was as great an element of personal danger in that plan, however, as in the first one. If the sheriff failed to get the man, the latter would probably try to make good his threat.

A third procedure was for Hancock to say nothing to anybody, not even to Nancy, but to go to the cabin without any money and there endeavor to capture his tormentor single-handed. Success would win him immunity from arrest, and also a reward; but how could he hope to accomplish it?

He had an appointment to meet the man. He would doubtless be under surveillance all the way up the trail to the cabin and back again, but would not be able himself to see the man; and further precautions about which he could know nothing would be taken.

Walking around the camp again because he could not sleep and fancied he could think better outdoors, Hancock finally decided that the logical thing to do was to notify the sheriff and then assist that official to make the arrest. That seemed the honest and patriotic course to follow, the safest one too for a person who might have to call upon the law either for assistance or mercy at any moment.

Daylight came, and in due course Nancy appeared in the office—so radiant and happy that Hancock dreaded to sadden her with his story. It seemed that, so far, he had brought her more trouble than anything else, and now he was on the point of harassing her again.

She noticed his preoccupied and gloomy mood, and asked him what was wrong; and he told her. He detailed every incident of the night and ended by expressing his desire to call in the sheriff.

Nancy surprised him by the vehemence of her protest.

"No!" she cried.

"Why not?" Hancock asked in surprise.

"Because the capture of that man is no business of yours. You're not an officer; you have no business to risk your life doing work that other men are paid to do. Give the murderer the money he demands, and make no attempt even to learn who he is."

"But is that patriotic—is it good citizenship?"

"I don't know, and don't care. It makes

no difference whether it is or not. A live citizen is better, even to the State, than a dead one."

"But, Nancy, don't you see that if I submit to him now he may make further demands? May keep on blackmailing me all my life?"

"No, I don't see it. You'll be through with him forever, and he'll be through with you."

"Another thing," Hancock continued to argue. "You think he'll kill me if the sheriff and I try to capture him and fail—shoot me from a distance as he so melodramatically threatened. Well, I don't think he'll try anything of the sort. He's no hardened murderer, as his fright when he hid the money in my bag proved. The chances are he'll be tickled to death to get out of the State with the thirteen hundred dollars he's already got, and he will never dream of making another attempt to get the seven hundred."

Nancy was not convinced.

"No," she argued back. "The man is a degenerate, a thief, and a killer; and men of that sort are the most vengeful on earth. And it's so easy for him to make an end of you in a dozen different ways—just as he threatened for one of them. Out here a good rifleman can pick you off and make his escape easily, or claim he was shooting at a jackrabbit if he's caught."

"But, my dear, where can we raise the seven hundred dollars? It's to-morrow night that I'm to take it to the cabin."

"Crippen will advance it now. I'm sure he will. It's so close to the end of the month, when I'll have much more than that due."

She stepped to the telephone. A long conversation followed—one that wrung Hancock's heart as he listened to her imploring the superintendent to come to her aid. The man at the other end seemed inclined to do so if she would only explain why she needed the money.

But that was precisely what she could not do, Nancy replied. Her word that she had to have it must suffice. She hung up at last with a great sigh that seemed to express both exhaustion and relief, and dropped into a chair.

"He'll do it," she said. "Your troubles are over."

But still Hancock was dubious. He pointed out that he might still be accused of the crime; and then his bad faith in refusing to call in the authorities would count heavily against him, while he could not prove the existence of the killer. Even she had not seen the man. No one else had. No one could support his story of the visit.

But Nancy was obdurate. Nothing counted with her against the possibility that if he failed to deliver the money he might be shot down like a dog. She motored to headquarters, and returned early in the afternoon with the necessary seven hundred dollars in cash.

"This settles it," she said. "You're going to the cabin to-night to deliver this money just as you were ordered. I insist, as I have a perfect right to since you're the man I've promised to marry. And to make sure that you don't lose your common sense at the last moment and try to capture him I'm going to take charge of that pistol you have. That miserable Maverick business will be all finished forever when you return, and we can think of happier things."

"All right," sighed Hancock. "You're my boss. Got to do as you say, I suppose."

With his mind thus made up—or made up for him, as he thought now and then—Hancock spent the remainder of the afternoon attending to the business of the camp.

It was another fine day, and everything went well. It seemed indeed that with the Maverick murder disposed of, as he hoped, the future promised everything that could be desired. Material prosperity, an agreeable occupation, the love of the dearest girl on earth—what more could even the gods desire? He agreed with Nancy at last that her decision regarding a settlement with the killer was probably the best one.

The gong rang, and they walked together to the dining room. Hancock noticed a motor car coming into the yard, and he and Nancy stopped to see who it was.

The car came purring along right up to the dining room door, and Sheriff Lem Fugel alighted.

CHAPTER XVII

ANOTHER ANONYMOUS LETTER.

HANCOCK'S premonition of danger was abated by the sheriff's response to Nancy's invitation to stay for supper.

"Just what I was hoping to do. Remembered the good grub you serve here and says to myself, says I: 'Why wait till I get to the village when chances are I can eat right here?' That's what you get for having a good cook."

"The oftener you come the better I like it."

Fugel turned to Hancock. "Hear you're making out first rate. Darned glad I am too."

"Think of the inspiration I have," responded the latter. He still was not feeling any too comfortable. He hoped the sheriff would keep off the subject of the Maverick tragedy. Now that he had decided to meet the terms of his midnight visitor without appealing to the law, he feared that he might inadvertently let slip some hint of what was in the air.

"Yeah, I heard about that inspiration business, too. Well, all I can say is—my heartiest congratulations. There's only about a thousand men on the line that wish they were in your boots."

"Sheriffs shouldn't be flatterers," said Nancy.

They chatted gayly throughout supper, and when it was over, Fugel strolled across the yard with them. They all entered the office together, and Hancock and Fugel lighted cigarettes. Nancy did not smoke, but she encouraged others to do so.

"By the way," remarked the sheriff, "I hear you folks got into a bit of a jam not long ago. Had to raise some money right off the bat for a lot of men that walked out. Is that how it was?"

"Something like that," replied Hancock, with a secret hope that the conversation could soon be switched to another topic.

"I hear it was you that came across with the cash. Lucky you happened to have it, wasn't it?" Fugel looked at Hancock in a manner that brought back all the latter's first fears.

"Oh, yes—little cash never hurts any one."

"But wasn't it a bit odd that you should have it? City fellows who come out to the grade as common laborers usually don't."

Hancock wondered what Fugel was driving at. "Exceptions to every rule, you know," he replied, nonchalantly.

Nancy's eyes were riveted upon the sheriff as though she, too, tried to determine what he was up to. The officer puffed at his cigarette, and flicked the ashes into a tray with a careless forefinger.

"So you really did come here with seven hundred dollars?" he queried. "Had the cash with you when you came?"

"Why—er—yes." Hancock was feeling more uncomfortable every second.

"How come, then, that you acted like you didn't have a cent? Told several different men you were broke?"

Hancock feared that his replies were none too convincing.

"Well—sometimes a man doesn't like to break into his cash reserve."

"Cash reserve, eh?" The sheriff studied the burning tip of his cigarette. "Excuse me for asking so many questions, but there's a bit of a reason. So you had all that cash back in St. Paul, did you?"

"Y-yes."

"But still you couldn't pay your hospital bill there. You tried to get back your old job, tried to land a dozen other positions, finally took the railroad job because you had to do something."

Hancock essayed a laugh.

"Great Scott! Where did you get all that dope? Must have been investigating my St. Paul record."

"I have."

"I don't see how you could."

"Easy enough. The employment agency that sent you out had your street address. I merely had a St. Paul detective go there, and from there to your last employer."

"But why?" Hancock was trying to conceal his mounting alarm.

Fugel reached into an inside pocket, and with slow deliberation, as though he were trying to make his man nervous, brought out a letter.

"Because I got that."

Fear sank sharp talons into Hancock's heart as he read it. He passed it to Nancy, and she gave him an agonized glance. It was an anonymous communication, crudely printed in the same manner as the one she had received several days previously.

Hancock has murdered man's money. He came through Maverick night of killing.

"Well!" exclaimed Hancock. "Somebody seems bound to get me into trouble. Miss Carroll received a letter like that."

"Let me see it."

The sheriff examined her similar communication, grunted, and returned it.

"Yep; some one has got it in for you," he agreed in a mild tone. "Got any idea who?"

"Pingree, possibly," said Hancock. "I can't think of any one else."

"Shouldn't wonder." Fugel put away his letter. "I hate notes like that. Keep a man running around on all sorts of crazy clews—because, of course, he has to run them down. But to get back to our muttons, is the writer right? Is the cash that you used to pull Miss Carroll out of a hole the cash that belonged to the murdered man in Maverick?"

Hancock held his breath. Now he was in for it. He must do one of two things at once—tell the truth about everything and risk death at the hands of the desperado, or try to lie out of it and get himself into who could tell what kind of a mess. He did not look at Nancy.

Doubtless she was trying to signal him some advice. But it was not a time to be guided by another's opinion. He must stand on his own feet. There was a long silence.

"Mr. Fugel," said Hancock at last, "I regret to inform you that the money I used on Miss Carroll's behalf did belong to the murdered man."

A gasp from Nancy.

The sheriff sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "That's the biggest news I've heard for many a day. I guess you'd better tell me the rest."

Hancock did so He began at the beginning, and detailed everything that had happened—at Maverick, on the train, at the camp when the need for cash was so urgent, his visit to Great Falls, and return with the remaining cash to the camp. He went into the matter of the nocturnal visit from the unknown man, and wound up with the decision he had reached to take to the cabin the money demanded.

Like a hound straining at the leash, Sheriff Fugel leaned forward in his chair, his long fingers tense, his compelling eyes fixed upon Hancock as he listened.

For Nancy it was a period of distress that caused her to sit tense and rigid, with occasional little exclamations as some detail in her lover's narrative seemed to tell heavily against him.

At the end of the recital the silence was so tense that only the gasping intake of Nancy's breath could be heard. The cigarettes that the men had smoked only a few moments previously still lay alight in the trays, but the atmosphere of friendliness had vanished.

"Young man," said the sheriff, in the cold and formal tone of authority, "your story may be true, and then again it may not be. You told me lies when I started to question you; so maybe this is all a lie."

"It isn't," cried Nancy. "It's what he told me."

"Indeed!" Fugel turned upon her the icy stare with which he had regarded Hancock. "You knew he was lying, and you didn't protest—a bit of a surprise, Miss Carroll."

"I don't care," Nancy insisted. "We came here to do railroad work, not to help you run down criminals."

"A dangerous attitude, my dear young woman, as many persons in this and other States could tell you. About the story, however, there's only one way to prove it. I'll watch that cabin to-morrow night, perhaps alone, perhaps with a deputy. If this mysterious fellow with the flash light shows up we'll get him. And if he doesn't, we've got one suspect anyhow."

"He won't show up," protested Han-

cock. "Not unless I go there and put the money in the can, as he ordered."

The sheriff grinned. "That's what I mean you should do."

"Even so, he won't. He'll see you because he'll be on the lookout. He warned me about putting you on his trail, said he'd shoot me with a rifle from some hidden spot if I did. Why, the chances are, he knows you're talking to me right this minute. He thinks I'm calling on you for help, and he's already decided to take his revenge."

Sheriff Fugel shook his head in an emphatic negative.

"No. He doesn't think you're calling on me for help, doesn't know I'm here at all. How could he know it when, according to your yarn, he can't be one of your camp men?"

"I have no idea who he is. All I know is that he's smart and merciless."

"So is the law smart. You just leave things to me, young man. Consider yourself lucky I'm not taking you to jail."

"You might as well. You're going to if the man doesn't show up at the cabin, and with you on his trail, there's no chance that he will."

"Smart as you say the fellow is," stated Fugel, "there's a way he can be caught—if he exists. As you say, we can't expect to go up there to-morrow night and surround the cabin and grab him, because to-morrow night he'll be on the watch for us. But to-night he won't be. Therefore, I'm going up the trail to-night, and lay hidden all day to-morrow.

"When the time comes you'll walk into the cabin, just as you say he ordered, put something that looks like money into the can, and walk away. Mr. Unknown will be watching for you, and he'll think you're alone because he saw no one else thereabouts all day. He'll enter the place to get the cash after you've left—and I'll snap the bracelets on him."

Nancy protested. "I don't want Mr. Hancock to risk his life in that way. In spite of your efforts to remain hidden all day to-morrow the man may see you; then he'll take a shot at Mr. Hancock as soon as he appears on the trail."

"Very well, then; I'll give up the cabin idea and take your man to jail with me right now."

"No," decided Hancock. "Your plan is best, sheriff. That at least gives me a chance to prove the truth." To Nancy: "If the criminal sees the sheriff I don't think he'll hang around to take a shot at me. He'll sneak out of the country."

"Perhaps. But what's to prevent him stopping off here as he goes for an attempt at revenge?"

"I'll have to risk that."

Fugel said: "I'll leave a deputy here for two purposes—to protect you and to see that you don't escape." He rose and stepped to the telephone.

"But the man may see the deputy hanging around to-morrow," Hancock protested. "He'll suspect something, and be on the lookout."

"No, he won't; I'll tell my man to remain indoors." Fugel telephoned his headquarters and instructed, not one deputy but two to come to the camp.

"I've decided to take one of them up the mountain with me," he stated. He added a moment later: "You're darned lucky, Hancock, that I've got faith enough in your story to go to all this trouble."

The deputies arrived an hour later. One was instructed to sleep in Hancock's room and keep a general watch on him, but not to accompany him on the following evening when he started for the cabin. The other prepared, with Fugel, to take up their positions that night.

Nancy procured food and drink for the latter two to consume during the whole of the next day, and they set off.

Hancock rigged up a cot for the remaining deputy in his room and after awhile they both retired.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT THE CABIN.

AS he lay awake just after going to bed that night Hancock was not sorry that an officer of the law was present in the room. He could not rid himself of the feeling that his unknown visitor of the

previous night was in a position to overhear and oversee everything that went on in the camp.

True, the location of his pistol when he found it indicated that the man had left the camp, also no one in the bunkhouse appeared to have such a hand as appeared in the flash light; but such bits of evidence were not conclusive proof that the man had not been about the place all day.

He might have flung the pistol out toward the road in order to give a wrong impression; he might have blackened his hand; Gloomy Gus might have lied when he stated that no one had entered the bunkhouse. If the nocturnal visitor was not one of the camp men, how could he have learned the things that he told Hancock?

But the night passed without incident, and in the morning Hancock tried to reassure himself that the man knew nothing of what was afoot, that Sheriff Fugel would succeed in capturing him and all would be well.

No sooner had Hancock succeeded in doing this, however, than Nancy appeared with a bad case of fright, and begged him not to go out on the grade alone, as he had planned.

"Take the deputy with you," she begged.

"That would spoil everything," Hancock argued. "It's likely that the criminal will take a peek at the camp some time to-day, perhaps through a telescope, just to make sure I haven't called in the law. If he sees the deputy with me he'll conclude that we're planning to get him, and that will spoil everything."

"I've got a feeling," Nancy replied, "that the man knows all about Fugel and everything else. The things that he told you about what goes on here is pretty good evidence that he's either in the camp himself or has a spy here. And if he knows that Fugel is after him, he thinks you sent him.

"That being so, he's quite likely to carry out his threat to get you—maybe with a rifle bullet from some distant point, just as he said. That is, if he sees you alone. Naturally, if a deputy is with you the man will think twice about shooting."

"No," said Hancock, emphatically. "Sorry to disagree with you, Nancy, but I've got to go about my business as usual. If a man were to get scared at every little danger that he fancies threatens him, there'd be no progress at all in the world."

They were at breakfast, with the deputy present, when this conversation occurred.

"I'm afraid, Miss Carroll," the officer said, "that your foreman has no choice in the matter. My orders are to remain indoors."

"That's so," Nancy puzzled. "I know. I'll go with you, Harry. The man won't take a shot at me if I'm beside you."

"No, thank you," rejected Hancock. "If anybody is going to risk becoming a target it's not going to be you."

"Then you must stay inside."

"No, but I will do this," with an effort Hancock achieved a grin. "I'll keep on the move, as a foreman should; then Mr. Sharpshooter can't get a bead on me."

Nancy sighed.

"Please carry your pistol at any rate," she begged. "You may meet the man right in the camp."

Hancock consented to do that, and after breakfast went about his business as usual.

A more calm and peaceful day could scarcely be imagined. The weather was as perfect as it had been for the past three weeks, warm sunshine tempered by a sweet-scented prairie zephyr, hardly a cloud in the sky. The earth in the cut continued to be soft; so that the grading machine plowed it up and loaded it into the wagons as fast as an augmented number of the vehicles could be driven up.

Many of the men sang as they worked, others called out joking comments to Hancock as he passed. Even the Graham camp did not surpass the Carroll outfit in efficiency nowadays. And here the men's spirits were higher because they were not so harshly driven.

It was hard for Hancock to believe, after he had walked about for an hour or so, that he had become so deeply enmeshed in the coils of a dangerous situation, that he was engaged in a contest of wits with a murderer, that at any moment the latter might confront him, and he would be compelled to battle for his life.

Up to noon, however, nothing had happened.

There was no real need for Hancock to spend his afternoon outdoors; in fact, there was some indoor work that required attention. Nevertheless he continued to go about the camp, watching everything, trying to visualize the things that were not being done as well as the things that were, constantly endeavoring to think out ways and means of moving dirt still faster. He became so interested in his work during the afternoon that for awhile he almost forgot the journey that he must undertake that evening.

After supper, however, he began the last of his preparations. He scissored newspaper sheets to the size of bank notes and on the outside placed a real bank note, then rolled up the bundle and secured it with a stout rubber band. He inspected again the pistol which he had carried all day. He wished now that he possessed a flash light; but it was too late to drive to the village to buy one, so he contented himself with a pocketful of matches.

Nancy wanted to ride with him in the car as far as the trail and wait there for him to return from his trip afoot up to the cabin, but again Hancock felt obliged to decline her offer.

As he set out alone he felt encouraged by the fact that the sheriff and his accompanying deputy had not been heard from. He thought it quite likely now that their plan to remain hidden near the cabin all day would succeed. The murderer-blackmailer had doubtless watched all day for some such attempt to surround the cabin and capture him, but their precaution to arrive during the previous night had probably fooled him.

Hancock found the trail without difficulty, at the point where it joined the road. He parked the flivver, and took the precaution to remove one of the minor parts so it could not be driven off. With everything in order, he set off up the trail in the swiftly deepening gloom, prepared to face whatever fate had in store for him.

He counted his steps as he proceeded along the plainly discernible trail. Each step was approximately a yard, so that when seventeen hundred and sixty of them had been paced he would be somewhere in the neighborhood of his destination. He tallied every hundred steps upon a slip of paper with a pencil, and paused to rest when he reached one thousand.

He regretted now more than ever his lack of a flash light. The moon had not yet risen to filter even a very dim light down through the trees, and the darkness became so intense that more than once he was compelled to light a match.

When his count indicated that he was within a hundred yards of his destination he proceeded more slowly, ears attuned for any sound, eyes piercing the darkness which was becoming a little less intense now because the moon was rising.

He caught his breath when the outline of the cabin loomed, squat and ugly, some eighty or nintey feet off the trail. It was as dark and silent as a sepulcher. He stood still for a long time, straining for some sound which would indicate either the presence of his enemy or his friends. Could it be possible that Sheriff Fugel and his assistant were actually in hiding near by? Could the demander of the money be near by, too, watching for his arrival?

How could the exponents of both crime and law be so close to one another without either side being aware of the presence of the other? It was a queer little drama that was being played there, far away even from the temporary dwellings of the county's temporary inhabitants. Hancock took his pistol from his pocket and crept toward the cabin, expecting at every step that something would happen.

Nothing did. He reached the open doorway and tried to peer within, without success. He stepped inside, and groped toward the center of the cabin, feeling for the table that he had been told would be there.

He found it. He crouched down beside it and turned slowly around, listening, pointing his pistol in every direction, imagining that every slight sound he heard indicated the presence of an enemy. What a fool he had been, despite his planning, not to have brought a flash light; so that if a light were thrown upon him he could

flash one back and learn who the other party was.

Nothing happened. The only sound was the whisper of the trees outside as their slender tops waved slightly to the stirring of a lazy breeze.

Rising again Hancock put his hand on the top of the bare table, and passed it from side to side, feeling for the empty tin can which he had been told would be there. He touched it. Yes, it was empty.

He thought that he ought to signify his arrival by showing a light. He scratched a match on the table and in the tense silence the crackle of the sulphur as it burst into flame was startlingly loud. He got one glimpse of the empty can, and the table, and the bare interior of the place; then blew it out and ducked down, listening.

He thought he heard the snapping of a twig outside. He could not be sure about it.

He rose and placed his fake bank roll in the can, then crept back to the door.

There he paused to listen again. He was almost convinced now that he was alone. Surely no human beings could remain close at hand without making some sound. Probably, he thought, the officers had sighted the blackmailer already and captured him. He indulged himself for a moment in the rosy fancy that they had, and that the man had confessed. Then he banished the dream. It was too good to be true. No man of the type that had visited him in his bedroom would confess to anything.

Stalking back to the trail Hancock now whistled a few bars as a signal to any one interested that he had performed his mission, and now was about to return.

Still nothing happened. No suspicious sound reached his ears, the darkness made it impossible to see anything but the nearest trees. He set off down the trail slowly, ears attuned to catch any sound that might come from back of him. He did not bother to do any counting now. More and more slowly he proceeded, with frequent pauses. He had a feeling that something would happen, that the farther he proceeded the more time he would require to get back to the cabin.

He heard it—a scuffling sound as of feet on a floor, then a short, sharp cry. He dashed back.

A shot sounded, then a rat-a-tat-tat of shots, so fast that he could not count them. Hancock reached the clearing, and shouted his name. He could see the flash of a light here and there, the moving about of two men.

"It's I—Hancock!" he cried, and joined them.

As he expected, the two men were Sheriff Fugel and his deputy. They were swearing. They snapped a partial explanation at him and went on with their search.

"Got away. Told him to put 'em up. He dashed off. We fired. Missed him, I guess."

"Scatter," ordered Fugel. "He'll take a shot at us."

At that instant Hancock glimpsed a flash of fire from the trees that surrounded the clearing and heard the crack of another pistol shot. Fugel and his man let loose another fusillade. Hancock raised his pistol to join them, but did not do so.

He thought suddenly that it was a terrible thing for three men to shoot at a human being, no matter how wicked he was, just as though he were a wild beast.

Later on he decided that for the time being the fugitive really was a beast, wilder and more dangerous than any that roamed the forest. But as the officers fired repeatedly Hancock merely followed his instinct not to shoot.

Following their shots the officers dashed forward, Hancock with them. The sheriff was flashing his light here and there. Presently he uttered an exclamation and held the light on a particular spot. The fugitive was lying on the ground, writhing a little, but making no sound until he realized that his fight was finished; then he moaned slightly and collapsed.

Fugel examined him.

"Just wounded, as far as I can make out. Let's carry him down to the road."

"Let me see him first."

By the sheriff's light, Hancock scrutinized the man. No, the fellow was not a member of his camp gang. Hancock had never seen him before, that is, not his features. He looked at the man's right hand, and

decided that he was indeed the person who had entered his bedroom in the night.

The man's knowledge of conditions at the Carroll camp must have been gained from some one who worked there, perhaps a pal, perhaps some loquacious worker who did not guess that the bits of information he imparted to a stranger at the village or elsewhere held deep significance for that stranger.

The officers lifted the man by the shoulders and feet, and carried him to the trail and down it until they had to rest.

"So you really did remain hidden all day," observed Hancock. "I don't see how you had the patience. Where did you hide?"

"Just lay in a deep thicket," Fugel explained.

"Did you see me arrive?"

"Sure—this guy, too. He's a cautious bird all right—not cautious enough, though."

The captive regained consciousness, and began to moan that his shoulder hurt.

"That all?" questioned Fugel.

"Yes, just my shoulder."

Fugel examined the wound. "Okay," he whispered to Hancock. "He'll recover." But he did not say that to the captive.

"Fellow, you'd better confess," he said. "You're liable to kick in for keeps. Don't want to die with a crime on your soul, do you?"

"Oh, I'm guilty—guilty, all right," moaned the man.

The effect of the words on Hancock was tremendous. So that was the end. He was cleared of suspicion. No longer would he have to worry over possible implication in the Maverick tragedy. The captive had confessed his guilt. How glad Nancy would be to hear the news, though.

What a glorious relief it would be for both of them! Never again would he get mixed up in any crime. Any money that he found in his grip thereafter would be turned over to the authorities at once, no matter what temporary inconvenience such action might cause.

"We'd better write that statement, and have him sign it." Fugel drew out a notebook, and scribbled in it with a fountain pen. "Sign this," he instructed the wounded man.

But the latter seemed already to regret his confession. He sat up suddenly, swaying, and with his hand clutching at his shoulder, but with the evident realization that he was in no danger of immediate death.

"Sign what?" he asked weakly.

"This confession of the Maverick murder. You just said you were guilty. Come on now. No use trying to wriggle out of it. We all heard you." The sheriff put the pen into the man's hands.

The captive dropped it on the ground.

"Guilty of murder—no chance!" he cried in a stronger tone. "Blackmail—that's what I meant. That's all I'm guilty of. I was making this guy here pay me for keeping still. Damned glad he was to do it, too. He knows I saw him kill that Maverick man and get away with the coin."

CHAPTER XIX.

FLOWER OF DESIRE.

FOR a moment Hancock was so shocked by the unexpected turn of affairs that all he could do was to stare at the wounded man. Then he cried at the sheriff:

"He's lying. He told me in my room that he was the killer. Said it was an accident. Surely you don't believe this stuff he's telling now."

Fugel's only answer was to click handcuffs on Hancock's wrists.

This brought a weak cackle of satisfaction from the accuser.

"Blame your killing on me, will you? I'll show you."

The deputy suggested: "Write a new statement, chief, and make the first guy sign it. He may croak after all; then it 'll be useful."

"Right." Fugel did so, and the first prisoner signed it with alacrity, writing the name Paul Tannen in good penmanship.

Dread added to disaster! If Tannen died now, Hancock realized, his antemortem statement would carry great weight with any court.

"For Heaven's sake, get him to a doctor!" he implored the sheriff. "If he lives I'll prove that he lies, but if he dies his word may be accepted as the truth."

The wounded man snickered. "You'll wish you'd paid up without any fuss."

Hancock said to Fugel: "Can't you realize that I wouldn't have let you try to catch him if what he says is true?"

"You didn't," retorted the sheriff. "Not till I was about to clap bracelets on you back in the camp."

Hancock subsided. There was no use talking to the sheriff. The man was only doing his duty. The whole thing would have to be threshed out in court.

All four got into the car, and the deputy drove past the camp to the village, where a doctor confirmed the sheriff's opinion that Tannen was not seriously wounded. That was a ray of comfort to Hancock, but only a slight one.

He was lodged in the village lock-up that night. Fugel was good enough to telephone Nancy the news of what had occurred, and in an hour she appeared, having been compelled to borrow a car from another camp and drive in alone. She entered the cell, and, throwing her arms around her *fiancé*, wept unrestrainedly.

"It 'll be all right," Hancock comforted. "I'm innocent and Tannen is guilty; so we've really got nothing to worry about. It's inconceivable that he should be let off, and I punished. The situation isn't half so bad as it would be if he were at large."

Nancy was only slightly consoled.

"It's evidence that counts," she lamented. "What really happened means nothing compared to what the evidence shows. And that, I'm afraid, is all against you. You can't prove an alibi."

"Don't be so pessimistic. Of course I can. And he can't. Don't forget that. He actually told me he killed the man."

"Yes, yes—but nothing is impossible in a court room. However, no use borrowing trouble. You'll have to stay in jail till the trial occurs. They'll not let you out on bail, even if we could raise it, which we can't."

"Just so long as you'll visit me, believe in me, I'll not mind so much."

"As if I could ever do anything else!"

Nancy stayed in the village that night, and next morning rode on the train with Hancock to the county seat. As she expected, nothing could be done there toward bailing him out. His trial would occur in only three or four weeks, however, since justice is not so slow in the West as in some Eastern States; and the man Paul Tannen would be held, too.

Nancy obtained for Hancock the best lawyer obtainable, a shrewd and successful looking man of middle age named Mason, and to this man Hancock told his whole story.

"The first thing to do," Mason decided, "is to try to find some one who saw you in the theater. That may not be so difficult as you imagine. We'll publish your photograph, and ask every one who was in the theater that evening to take a good look at it. I'll go to Maverick and try to dig up a few witnesses who saw you in the place."

Both the lawyer and Nancy left presently, and a mood of black depression settled upon Hancock as he found himself for the first time in his life inside a barred cell. On a charge of murder!

It seemed inconceivable that this should be so. Surely, thought he, the charge was a dream, though his incarceration might not be. Surely he would waken presently to find himself lodged behind bars for a few hours only on some such charge as speeding a motor car. Murder! The most awful charge that could be lodged against him. And all because he had wanted to capture the real murderer himself, had come to Nancy's rescue when she was threatened with ruin for lack of a few hundred dollars.

Oh, well. No matter what his loss had been or might be he at least had won Nancy. Nancy believed in him, would leave no stone unturned to help him. Nancy loved him. With her help and encouragement his future could not, after all, be so very black.

For awhile Hancock accepted his imprisonment as one of the crosses that must be borne by every man. Better that his should be heavy and soon laid aside, he thought, than light but permanent.

This pretty bit of optimism was a bit shaken, however, when Lawyer Mason returned from Maverick with the disheartening news that he had been unable to find any one who had seen Hancock in the theater on the night of the murder. The ticket seller had not noticed him, the ticket taker had not, nobody had. Nor had any of his companion laborers seen him enter or leave the place.

"You remember the picture, though," Mason encouraged. "Better go over all its points mentally so you can tell the complete story on the stand. The fact that you can tell all about it is our one chance to convince the jury that you saw it."

As the days and weeks dragged along to the date set for his trial Hancock comforted himself with the thought that his recital of what occurred on the screen could not fail to prove that he had spent practically all of his hour off the train looking at it. Again and again he went over the action of the picture called Flower of Desire, trying to recollect details, until he was practically certain that he was overlooking nothing of importance. Even many of the subtitles he was able to recall.

Came the momentous day. The court room was crowded, since the case had received a great deal of notice in the local press. Many railroaders who happened to be in the city were present. Nancy Carroll was on hand, just outside the railing that inclosed the prisoner. She had done her best to cheer him up, said that as a result of his reorganization of her camp the work had proceeded quite well in his absence, and with him on the job again in two or three days she could not fail to complete her contract in a highly satisfactory and satisfying manner.

The court was opened, the prosecutor made his opening address, the case was under way.

One by one, as the defendant expected, all the incriminating facts were brought out —principally his possession of the stolen money and failure to deliver it to the authorities. That, as Hancock now realized with dismay, was an error of far greater magnitude than he had considered it to be at the time he committed it. The prosecution scouted the contention that such a failure to assist the law could be caused by anything but a guilty conscience.

Hancock's reluctance to use the money on Nancy's behalf was brought out and dilated upon too; also his precaution to deposit only the worn bank notes after he had learned from the sheriff that the new ones could be identified.

Finally, said the attorney for the State, Hancock's willingness to buy Paul Tannen's silence was proof positive that he was guilty as charged.

At the end of the first day only a good start had been made on the case. Hancock was led back to his cell, and Nancy went to a hotel; and next morning the trial was resumed.

Came Hancock's chance to tell his story, and the manner in which he did so did not fail to impress both the jury and the spectators. Corroborative evidence was sadly lacking; nevertheless his conviction was far from being a foregone conclusion.

The cross-examination by the prosecutor failed to shake his story in the slightest degree, while, on the other hand, Lawyer Mason's cross-examination of Tannen brought out the fact that the man was anything but a credible witness. Confronted with his record, which Mason had succeeded in unearthing, Tannen admitted that he had served time in a penitentiary, that he had come West in the same work car as Hancock, that he had spent his hour in Maverick walking about. He had witnesses to testify that he had been seen on the street and in a cigar store, but his entire hour in the town was by no means accounted for.

The staff of the Maverick theater was called by the State to say whether or not they had seen the defendant in the theater on the night in question, and not one of them could swear he was there.

Nor was Hancock's description of the place sufficiently detailed to prove he had even been inside it, let alone that he had remained there for fifty-five minutes. The theater manager, a man named Gault, and his assistants were dismissed and took the first train back to Maverick, and the second day of the trial drew to a close.

It was on the third day that Lawyer

Mason made his biggest effort to secure an acquittal.

"Your honor and gentlemen of the jury," he stated, "it is true that no witness can swear he saw my client in the Maverick Motion Picture Theater during the whole time that the work car remained in the yard; nevertheless Mr. Hancock can prove he was there by telling you all about the picture. You may say that he saw it elsewhere. Yes, he may have—but he didn't. It has not been possible for him to see Flower of Desire since that time, because the film has not been exhibited either at the village near which he works or here in this city. And if he saw it previously, back in St. Paul, it is hardly possible that he could remember the details."

Hancock again took the stand.

"When I entered the Maverick movie house, five minutes after the train arrived," he stated, "the feature picture had commenced. This annoyed me a bit at first, because I think that no picture is good unless one sees it from the start; but in a few minutes I was able to pick up the story and guess what had gone before, and presently I became as interested as if I had arrived ten or fifteen minutes earlier.

"What was taking place on the screen when I got settled in my seat was this: A young baseball player who had just been signed to a big league contract was refused admittance to his girl's home by her father, but a few minutes later the father admitted a rich stockbroker who also wanted the girl. The ball player was a nice young fellow and the broker a hardened old *roué;* so, of course, every one sympathized with the hero.

"The next scene was where the stockbroker invites the girl and her father to his luxurious mansion, and a lot of comedy was worked in when the old man did not know how to use the forks and spoons. The broker asks dad and the daughter to spend a week-end at his mountain lodge, and dad accepts for both.

"Next, dad and daughter are leaving for the mountains. The broker has sent his ex-convict chauffeur to take them to the train, after giving him secret instructions; and the chauffeur fixes it so the old man misses it, while the daughter is carried away. The broker now shows up on the train and tells the girl her father will be along on the next one. But father doesn't know where the lodge is really located; so the villain has the girl virtually at his mercy.

"The hero, however, happens to run across the old man. He convinces him that the broker is doing him dirt; so the two of them hire a fast motor car and set out to overtake the train at its first stopping point, some thirty miles out of the city.

"To get to the station first the car tries to cross the track in front of the train and is wrecked, and the father is hurt, though the hero is not.

"As the train is standing still, with the engine crew out of the cab, it starts accidentally and goes tearing along past the station, with the broker and the girl inside. But the hero manages to climb aboard. He goes forward to the engine and stops it just before it runs into another train. He convinces the girl that the broker deliberately tried to get her off alone with him, and in the hospital, where the father is not seriously hurt, he convinces the latter of the same thing.

"The story was plainly nearing the end, with everything lovely for the hero, when I saw by the clock down in front that I had to get back to the car; so I left."

There was a perceptible stir among the spectators as Hancock concluded his recital of what he saw on the screen of the Maverick theater. The jurors were unquestionably impressed. Nancy leaned forward.

"Splendid!" she congratulated. "That got them. They can't convict you after that. It's too evident that you saw the picture."

The prosecuting attorney, however, showed no sign of discouragement.

"Your honor and gentlemen of the jury," he stated, rising with a smile of satisfaction, "I was prepared to hear that story, and now I am going to convince you that, instead of being evidence for the defense, it is precisely the opposite. I am going to demonstrate beyond the possibility of doubt that, while the prisoner knew that Flower of Desire was being shown at the Maver-

ick theater that evening—probably because he noticed the sign as he went by—he did not see the picture, either there or anywhere else."

Lawyer Mason jumped to his feet with a demand as to how his client could recite the action of the picture if he had not seen it.

"By reading about it," stated the prosecutor blandly. "It is a well known fact that the stories of many pictures are printed in magazines in an abbreviated form, often with portions omitted so that the length of the story can be held down to a certain arbitrary number of words.

"I know positively that the defendant read the story instead of witnessing it on any screen, for the simple reason that he did not tell the whole story. He left out an important feature of it. Just how important we can all see when, with the permission of the court, I will cause to be thrown on the screen, right here in the court room, the picture as it really has been shown in various theaters."

A scene of intense excitement followed. This was a sensation—the showing of a motion picture in the court room. The spectators babbled so much that the judge had to rap furiously for order and threaten to clear the room if the clamor did not cease. When order was restored the judge ruled that the picture might be shown, and, to Hancock's mingled consternation and astonishment, a cloth screen was hung on the wall and a portable projecting machine was set up at the rear.

The prosecutor conferred with the operator and announced:

"In order not to take up the time of the court unnecessarily, the operator will cut the first roll of the film at the point where the defendant says he entered the theater, that is, where the hero is refused admittance to the heroine's home, and show the picture from that point to the finish. Cutting out portions of a film is, I assure you, a simple operation that is practiced more than most movie-goers realize. The severed parts can easily be glued together again.

Hancock sat with clenched hands and a dreadful fear clutching at him. He leaned toward his lawyer.

"What's he up to? What's the idea? I told the story just as I saw it; I swear I left out nothing of importance."

Lawyer Mason was puzzled too.

"Some kind of a trick. We'll see pretty soon. But don't worry. They can't win a verdict of murder with a trick."

Hancock looked at Nancy, who sat just outside the railing, her staring eyes fixed upon the blank screen that was being fastened to the wall. He leaned toward her and whispered:

"What's it all about?"

She shook her head despairingly.

"I don't know; we'll soon see."

The spectators were intensely still now. Never had they heard of any such court room procedure as this—the showing of a motion picture. It was better, far better, entertainment than they had hoped for.

Abruptly the judge issued orders to the several officers in the room.

"The defendant and chief witness will be handcuffed, each to an officer."

The spectators gasped and exchanged low-voiced comments. Had something startling been planned for the moment when the court room would be plunged into comparative darkness for the showing of the picture?

Many of the lights were lowered, but a sufficient number were left to give more than the ordinary movie house illumination.

From the rear of the room came a purring sound and on the screen flashed the characters that Hancock had just described. The father refused the handsome young ball player admission to his house and the latter left in despair.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PICTURE DECIDES.

As one scene followed another on the makeshift screen which hung on the court room wall, Hancock could not understand why the prosecuting attorney had decided to show Flower of Desire. Except for the inclusion of numerous little touches, mainly comedy, which he had failed to recollect, the scenes proceeded one after the other just as he had described them.

So far as he could see, the picture was an argument in his favor. Surely the absence of tiny details from his story could not logically be counted against him. A story which included everything would be more open to suspicion than one which omitted unessential points. No one could be expected to remember every incident in a picture which one had witnessed casually several weeks previously.

There must be a reason and a mighty good one for this exhibition, however, and as the minutes ticked on Hancock became increasingly anxious to learn what it was. Was some sort of a *coup* that he never had heard of, about to be sprung? Was he to be seized in the semi-darkness, and lynched?

He recollected that portions of the West are still supposed to be wild, and he thought it probable that the dead man had many friends. Was that what the judge had tried to guard him against when he ordered the handcuffs? Hancock jiggled the chain which fastened him to an officer in an effort to assure himself that he need not fear lawlessness, and the officer's quick command to keep still was vastly more comforting than indifference would have been.

Now the father and the girl were dining at the broker's home, and the funny business of the old man's ignorance and clumsiness with the tableware began to take hold of the audience. Titters sounded. Some one laughed aloud. A sharp rapping of the gavel reminded the spectators that they were not in a movie theater, and the sounds of mirth subsided to an occasional suppressed snicker.

To Hancock, it was anything but a laughing matter. He could not understand the purpose of the exhibition, and, as is always the case, the unknown danger was more worrisome than a known one would have been.

He turned from the screen to look at Nancy, and observed that she was as much engrossed in it as any one else. He wished that she would look at him, he felt that just one glance would be comforting; but he did not like to disturb her. His lawyer, too, had his gaze fixed intently on the screen.

Glancing across at the prosecutor, Hancock saw that he also was closely following the action.

Finally, the judge rapped on his desk, and spoke.

"I fail to see the object of all this. The picture is just as the defendant described it."

The State's attorney jumped to his feet so suddenly that Hancock's heart jumped, and pounded furiously. He thought it might be some sort of signal. But it appeared not to be. No one else jumped. The attorney addressed the court in his usual manner.

"In a few minutes, your honor, my reason for showing Flower of Desire will become quite clear."

Hancock wished that the moments would pass more quickly. The suspense was becoming unbearable. He was deriving no entertainment from the film, as most of the others in the court room appeared to be doing.

A laugh sounded when the father found himself left behind by the train that was carrying off his daughter. There was a tense moment of comedy-drama, which he had omitted, when the old man turned upon the chauffeur and accused him of a plot to hold him, but Hancock could not see that the incident was important.

The furious ride of the hero and the father to overtake the girl on the speeding train followed, and the spectators watched the chase, some with excited gasps, others with remarks to the effect that it was very old movie stuff and pretty poor. The photography was good, however, and the efforts of the father to keep his unaccustomed silk hat upon his head added the always-welcome touch of comedy.

Then the crash.

As the audience gasped, Hancock thought that something must surely happen now. But no. A lull followed the smash. The action slowed down considerably. The hero extricated himself from the wreck of the car slowly, the old man was anything but funny as he lay stretched on the track-side grass.

The neglect of the engineer properly to turn off the locomotive's immense power

before he descended from it was a portent of disaster, however, and the tension was tightened up again when the long train was seen to move, so slowly at first that no one noticed it, then faster and faster.

"Your honor!"

Now something was about to happen. The prosecutor had risen to his feet and paused, as though for dramatic intensity.

Little exclamations were heard, startled gasps, then breathless silence as the audience tried to do two things—watch the picture and listen to the attorney.

"Your honor and gentlemen of the jury—kindly watch the picture very closely from this point onward."

Suddenly Hancock cried: "Oh!" in a muffled tone, and stared at the screen in a state of fascinated horror.

Afterward, in a moment that was calmer though no less fearful, he tried to recollect whether or not he had heard a startled cry from Nancy, who sat so close to him.

Now, all that mattered was the picture, the incredible scene that was flashed upon the screen.

The action did not now proceed as he had recounted it, as he had seen it on the night of the tragedy.

The hero did not leap on the train, as Hancock had so confidently stated, because that was what he had seen in the Maverick theater. The hero did something so utterly different, so incredibly and terrifyingly divergent, that Hancock could only sit and stare in horror, and breathe in little short gasps, while his rigid fingers almost sank into the wooden arms of his chair.

The hero tried to leap on the train and failed. But an airplane happened to be standing in a field not far off, and there he ran and implored the pilot to take him up. A roll of bills swiftly changed hands while, several hundred yards distant now, the uncontrolled train sped down the track, rocking so that the passengers were pitched out of their seats, plunging straight toward another train that was coming up the track.

In the airplane cockpit now, the hero pointed frantically down at the runaway train. The pilot nodded and pressed a button. The propeller began to whir. For an incredibly long time it whirred, with the runaway train that must be overtaken gathering still greater speed every second; then it taxied down the field.

With a graceful lift the airplane took off in the direction of the train.

Swiftly it gained upon the runaway monster until presently it was right above it. A rope-ladder was thrown down and dangled on the roof of the car, and the hero's gallant intention at once became plain. He meant to board the train from the airplane and bring it to a stop.

Could he succeed? He climbed over the side of the cockpit and slowly descended on the swaying ladder, rung by rung, until his feet almost touched the car roof. Ah! He had done it. One second he was hanging on the rope ladder, the next he was safe upon the car roof.

Hancock heard a sniff of disdain.

"Faked!"

He could guess what was to follow, and his guess proved correct. The hero ran through the coaches to the engine, shut off the power, and brought the runaway train to a standstill about ten feet distant from the up train into which, in another five seconds, it would have crashed with a terrifying loss of life.

Unexpectedly the picture was shut off, and the lights turned up, and the spectators came back, with many exclamations, to the business of trying a man for murder.

The prosecutor was on his feet.

"Your honor and jurors, you, of course, have seen the point I wish to make. Just a few moments ago the defendant recited what he claimed was the action of this picture entitled Flower of Desire for the purpose of proving that he was looking at it in the Maverick theater at the time that the murder in that town was committed.

"Now, you can see that he stands convicted by the very evidence which he submitted in an effort to clear himself. He told some of the picture's action, but not all of it. He left out an extremely important part. He stated that when the hero endeavored to board the moving train from the ground he succeeded.

"But you have seen, in the real picture, that the hero did no such thing. He failed because the train was going too fast. So

he hired an airplane, and was let down to the roof of the train on a rope ladder, and in that manner he did succeed in boarding it—a very different and, I might say, a much more thrilling feat than merely to board it from the ground.

"The conclusion that you must derive from such a difference between the defendant's story and the real story is, of course, obvious. He never saw the picture in Maverick; never saw it anywhere at all. He merely read an abbreviated version of the story, either in a review, or in a fiction magazine. Reviews rarely detail a whole story, and, as I have explained before, the fictionized versions of motion pictures are often cut down to an arbitrary number of words. In his case, the version that he read omitted the airplane sequence, which proves absolutely and beyond the shadow of a doubt that he never saw the real picture.

"And upon this story of his, remember, he depended to cheat the law. Had he recited it correctly, he still would not have proved that he sat for an hour in the Maverick theater while the murder there was being committed, but there would have been some reason to think that he did, and, since his life is involved, you might logically have given him the benefit of the doubt. But now, with his sole prop swept from under him, how can you possibly doubt, in view of the fact that the murdered man's money was found in his possession, and a witness swears that he saw him commit the deed, that he did actually and willfully murder James Hatfield?"

The attorney sat down, and a long pause followed during which no sound save that of tense breathing could be heard.

Stricken dumb and motionless, his mind chaotic with doubts and new terrors, Hancock looked imploringly at his lawyer. The latter had slumped down in his chair as though his interest in the case had ceased. He roused himself, however, and questioned Hancock in a whisper:

"Well, what about it? The picture seems to prove you weren't there. If that's the case what can I do?"

"But I was!" Hancock tensed over the table. "I was, I tell you—was there, just as I said! There's some trickery about this picture. It's got things that the other didn't have. They put something in it to convict me."

Lawyer Mason shook his head.

"They couldn't have. It was the same hero, the same train—everything the same. It was the original picture all right."

"But it wasn't!"

Mason shrugged his shoulders, and hopeless of securing any comfort or even belief from him, Hancock turned to Nancy. She at least would believe him. Even though he were sentenced to hang that very afternoon Nancy would be faithful to the end. That was his one consolation.

Nancy was not there!

At the ghastly realization that her chair was empty, that she had gone away without saying a word, Hancock sagged down in his seat like an empty sack.

All was over. Why fight any longer? The one person in all the world in whom he had trusted had deserted him. The picture had caused her to disbelieve his story, as did every one else.

He began to doubt it himself. Perhaps he had fallen asleep back there in the Maverick movie-house. Yes, that must be the explanation. He had temporarily dozed off, tired by the all-day train ride, and awakened without realizing he had missed some of the picture. And now, because of that, he was to be hanged for murder.

Well, he did not care. With Nancy no longer believing in him, what did it matter what they did to him? Might as well die and get it over with. Living would only be a burden. He never could trust any one again, never could find the ambition to work. He would become just a hopeless derelict if he were released, useless to himself and to the world. Yes, it would be better to die.

But not on the gallows! God, what a horrible death that would be. What an eternal disgrace to his hard-working father, his dear old mother. If only he could die some other way.

If only his mother were present to tell him that she, at least, believed in him. She would. He knew that. No matter how black looked the circumstances, she would believe in him.

If only he had come West under an assumed name! Then his parents would never know he had been executed for murder. He would just disappear out of the world that had treated him with such frightful injustice, and no one would ever know what happened to him. But he had not. Fool that he was, he had used his real name. Always he had considered that the use of an alias or pseudonym was a criminal's trick, but now he saw his mistake. Now every newspaper in the land would carry an item to the effect that in Montana a young man named Harry Hancock had been hanged for murder.

The attorney for the State was addressing the jurors, but for a long time Hancock did not hear him. His thoughts were too bitter.

Then at last he began to take notice. The attorney was summing up, putting all the mass of evidence into one lump so that even the most kindly disposed juror could not fail to realize where lay his duty.

On and on the man talked, Hancock paying little attention. When the prosecutor finished Mason would make whatever argument he could, and the case would go to the jurors. That very afternoon, probably it would go to them, because Mason could have little to say. There was practically no evidence for the defense!

An hour passed, the most dreadful hour of Hancock's existence. Dully he comprehended what the speaker was saying about him. Inhuman monster who slew for a mere bundle of money, sly and cowardly creature who had plotted to put the onus of his guilt upon a lesser criminal's shoulders, sneaking ingrate who had wormed himself into the good graces of an estimable young woman who, thank Heaven, had seen the light, and now had deserted him—all these things and worse Hancock listened to.

He did not need to look at the jurors to see that already he was convicted. The glances of the spectators at one another as they shrugged their shoulders, and nodded agreement with the attorney was not necessary to convey to his mind the expectation of every one that the jurors would have little trouble in coming to a decision.

Hancock wished the man would hurry up. Why delay the ultimate moment? Every man and woman in the court room, including even his own lawyer, had decided that he was guilty. What was it that Nancy had said, back in those dear distant days when the world looked bright and happy? Oh, yes—what one has really done counts for little, what the evidence shows counts for everything. Nancy! Oh, God! Why could they not get the agony over with? Why draw out the torture—out, out! If only they would hang him that very afternoon, how grateful he would be.

The prosecutor finished his address to the jury at last, and with a lumbering and reluctant movement Mason rose to his feet.

Hancock wanted to ask him to desist, wanted to tell Mason that any feeble and dispirited effort he might make to clear him was a useless waste of time. But he did not. He knew that to do so would be useless. No, the law's formula must be followed. So much argument, so many words from the judge to the jurors, so many minutes of deliberation, so much folderol when they returned to the court room and delivered their verdict, so much formality by the judge in sentencing him to death, so many dreadful days of waiting until he mounted the gallows, so much fussing around of a minister, so much business of adjusting the black cap—then, thank Heaven, the end at last!

Paying more attention to his own bitter thoughts than to his lawyer's words, Hancock did not appreciate that the man was really doing for him all that could be expected under the so terribly adverse circumstances. But it was a trying, wearying, monotonous time for all concerned. The defendant's guilt was so plain to every one. Why, the spectators seemed to ask one another, bother with all this waste of time when there was only one possible verdict for the jurors to arrive at?

And then suddenly the thing that no one anticipated happened. The court room door opened and Nancy Carroll entered. With her was a man, and both of them hurried down the aisle to the prisoner's box.

Paying no attention to any one, she went straight to Hancock, and said:

"It's all right, dear—I've brought him in time."

Then she collapsed. Just sat down in her chair, that had stood vacant so long, and sagged over to one side, farther and farther until the person in the next seat had to hold her up and call for help.

As she was carried into an adjoining room amid a babble of voices and a scene of confusion such as even the picture had not caused, Hancock rose to dash after her. But he could not. The cruel handcuff jerked him back so that his arm, not tensed for the pull, was nearly snapped out of joint.

The man who had accompanied Nancy spoke.

"Your honor, I have just a few words to say."

The attention of every one was riveted upon the man. He was Mr. Gault, who owned and managed the Maverick Motion Picture Theater.

"Your honor and gentlemen of the jury," stated Mr. Gault when he had been duly sworn, "I want to say something about that picture, Flower of Desire, that I ran in my theater the night that James Hatfield was murdered.

"Now you may believe it or not, but the fact is, there are a lot of particular people living in Maverick. They like good pictures, and they dislike poor ones.

"Well, no sooner had I run off Flower of Desire in private, as I always do, than I saw to my sorrow that it was one of the poor ones. All of you saw that, I guess, right here, when the picture was shown, as Miss Carroll told me it was when she telegraphed me to come here as fast as a motor car would bring me, and then went to meet me in the swiftest car she could hire for fear I wouldn't come fast enough. The hero is too heroic, the villain too black, the heroine too sweet and insipid, the father too much of a boob.

"Well, I got more and more disgusted with the thing as it ran along, though I don't deny there's laughs in it here and there, and thrills for people, children mostly, who never think about logic. But when I came to that business of the handsome hero going up in the airplane, and hopping off it onto the top of a speeding train, and then choking off the steam, and stopping the train ten feet from where the awful wreck would have occurred—well, your honor, I just did what many another manager does when a picture doesn't suit him.

"I sliced it to suit myself. I cut out that crazy business of the airplane. I jumped the action from where the hero tried to board the train to where he goes from car to car toward the engine, and not one person in a hundred in my audience noticed that there was a little hitch. Afterward I glued the picture together again and sent it away just as I received it.

"So, your honor and jurors, maybe that explains why the complete picture that you saw here doesn't match the picture that this young man says he saw in my theater. In fact, since it is doubtful if another manager in the whole country sliced out that airplane sequence, the fact that the defendant left the airplane out of his story proves that he really did see the film in my theater and no other, just as he says he did."

Hancock just sat as though paralyzed. The shock of surprise, the sudden lift from blackest despair to the shining mountain of hope, was almost too much for him, as it had been for Nancy.

His lawyer scarcely needed to argue, as he did, that Manager Gault's story was a complete alibi for the defendant.

An hour later Hancock was acquitted.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE REBOUND.

IT was Sunday afternoon at the Hancock grading camp, ten miles up the line from headquarters on the new line of construction. The day before it had been the Carroll camp, but now the owner's name was not Carroll, but Hancock—Mrs. Harry Hancock—so naturally the camp had to change its name, too.

The newlyweds had arrived home on the previous afternoon. They had been married in the city on Friday evening, only a few hours after Hancock's sensational acquittal; and they had planned a quiet return to the scene of their joint endeavors.

Quietness had not been their portion, however. They had sent ahead no word

of their marriage, and felt sure that no one on the grade knew about it; therefore their reception at the camp had been as surprising as it was riotously exuberant.

First, the men had dropped their tools, and dashed away from their jobs to meet them. They had gathered about their car with three times three cheers, with shouted congratulations that still rang in their ears, with a speech of welcome from that ancient aristocrat of ballroom and bunk house society known to fame and misfortune as Mr. Napier McNaughton.

Mac had been in splendid form. Great, long words came tripping off his tongue like music from a hand organ, his gestures were the grandiloquent ones of an old-time Senator. He expressed the sentiments of the camp in a manner that brought cheers from his comrades.

The newlyweds had replied in a confused but fitting manner; then all had adjourned to the cook shack for a spread that many a city chef would have been proud of; more speeches there. Even Blackie, who had managed the camp in Nancy's absence, and made a very good job of it, too, gave his tongue a tryout, and, managing to overcome his shyness in public for once, sent the long table into gales of laughter. It had been a rough gathering, yes—but the sincerity of it made an impression on Hancock that he never could forget.

"What I want to know," he had asked, "is how you got word of our marriage?"

"The radio, the radio! Don't you know that news of importance is broadcast every night?"

The Saturday night reception was all over now, but still joy reigned supreme at the Hancock camp. In the yard the men played a hectic game of baseball with shouting abandon, while up on the cool and grassy hillside Hancock and Nancy sat and discussed at length the things that they had discussed briefly before.

"What I want to know," Hancock said, "is how in the world you got that wonderful idea that the Maverick manager might have cut something out of his picture."

"Why, I just read about managers doing that—in a magazine, I think. It seems that not so long ago the practice became so prevalent as to be a nuisance. Managers would slice out this and that, and forget to glue it back in again, and the next manager would have to inspect his picture very carefully to make sure it was all there. The film exchanges made a big protest, and I imagine the practice is dying out now, especially as the best companies make pictures so good that they don't have to be sliced."

"Thank Heaven for that magazine article—and for your wonderful memory that didn't forget it. But, my angel, why didn't you tell me your reason for leaving the court room that day? I thought"—Hancock winced at the memory—"that you had deserted me."

Nancy looked very sorrowful.

"I know now that I should have. It was a terrible mistake, one that I'll always regret—"

"Oh, no; don't say that."

"The fact must have been, I suppose, that one thought filled my mind so completely as not to leave room for another. I thought of nothing save getting that manager into the court room. I reasoned—if I did reason at all, which I doubt, that not a single second was to be lost. I knew—I seemed to know positively—that he had sliced his film, and if I could only get him in front of the jury before it was too late you could be saved. So—well, it seems that we poor mortals never can do all the things we ought to do."

Hancock replied with fervor, "I'll say we can't! Catch me holding any package of money that doesn't belong to me again! If I had only delivered that one to the authorities as soon as I found it, think of the trouble I would have avoided."

Nancy was doubtful. "You don't know. How can one tell? They might have grabbed you for the murder right then, as you feared they would. And then the real murderer would have escaped. As it is, they have him."

"Yes. I guess Mr. Paul Tannen will wish he hadn't tried to recover the package. There seems to be quite enough evidence to convict him when he's tried next month."

"I wonder if we'll find out then how he got all that information about you? Do you suppose he had a pal in the camp who kept tabs on you and told him, or did he just make inquiries among the men when he happened to meet them in the village?"

"Probably the latter. He may have merely guessed part of it, too."

"He seemed really to have lost track of the grip he hid the stolen package in," Nancy observed. "He didn't know you had it till you came to my rescue with the cash."

"I guess he got panicky, all right, after he had found that he had killed the man."

"Oh, well, those things don't matter now."

"No; not even the minor mystery of who sent the anonymous letters. It surely couldn't have been Tannen. It wasn't to his interest to put the sheriff on your trail. Do you think it could have been Pingree?"

Hancock considered those letters, as he had on several previous occasions.

"Yes, I do. Either Pingree wrote them himself, or he put some one up to do the job."

"Guesswork?"

"Yes. The first merely told you to ask me where I got the money; just a nasty little hint that I hadn't secured it honestly, which happened to hit the nail on the head."

"And the second, the one to the sheriff?"

"Guesswork again. He saw that the letter to you didn't bust up our friendship—learned about that from some one here, I suppose—so he got to wondering if maybe he couldn't accomplish with a second letter to the sheriff what he had failed to accomplish with the first to you. If that isn't the explanation I simply do not know what is."

Nancy shrugged her slim shoulders.

"Not that it matters."

Hancock looked down at the prosperous camp, and the happy workers. He looked up at the clear Montana sky, basked in the radiance of the sun, breathed with delight the winelike prairie air. He looked at Nancy, and marveled again that she was really his wife. It all seemed too good to be true. But it was true. That was the enchanting thing about life—wonderful, mysterious, unfathomable life. One never knew to what dizzy heights of happiness one might attain. The lower one sank in despair, it seemed, the higher was the rebound when clouds gave way to sunshine.

"Nothing matters but you," said Hancock.

THE END

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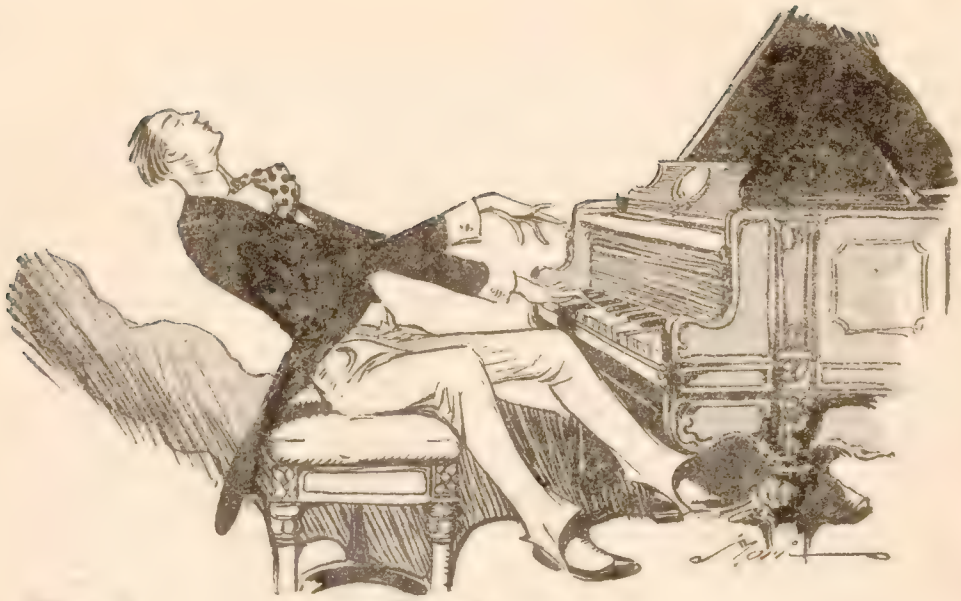
THE SHIP MODEL

HERE in the dusty offices of trade,
An export business reaching to far lands,
The model of a vessel is displayed,
A clipper ship in miniature it stands;
The masterpiece of one whose toiling hands
Spread sail on sail across the distant sea,
Who hears no more peremptory commands
To shorten canvas off a hostile lee.

And that fair ship from which this toy was formed,
Whose name she bears was famous in her day;
Often around the sullen Horn she stormed,
And equaled steamer time from dim Cathay.
Her timbers bleach where some far headland rears,
The model holds her course across the years.

Thomas J. Murray.



Tying a Temperament to Thaddeus

By CHARLES DIVINE

IN a large room on the seventh floor of the Chamber of Commerce Building, in the heart of the city, Sarah Dineen was giving a tea. It was an unusual tea. Cups were poured for only two—Sarah and her guest, Thaddeus Wickliffe.

It was also an unusual room. Sarah called it her "studio," furnished with an odd conglomeration of objects in which East met West—Oriental rugs and an Occidental typewriter, a dreamy divan and a wide awake desk, brass candlesticks, and gun-metal office files.

"Thaddeus," said Sarah to her guest, for they knew each other well, "come over here and kiss me!"

Thaddeus looked startled but pleased.

He was a slim young man, dark of eye and hair, who wore inconspicuous clothes and an air of accepting the universe as he saw it through horned-rimmed glasses—darkly. He was the mildest-mannered man who ever put a white collar on a throat. His was size fourteen.

Above it arose a well-shaped but naïve chin, which life had not yet battered with its capital L. In fact, everything about Thaddeus suggested the amiable, gullible youth that he was—a short, frank nose; receptive and eagerly outspread ears; wide, trusting eyes.

Sarah Dineen, as sophisticated as Thaddeus was naïve, might have been forgiven for supposing that his great-grandfather bought one of the first gold bricks sold to a visiting farmer in the city, or that his grand-

father purchased the Brooklyn Bridge from a suave stranger one day, or that, farther back in the annals of the Wickliffe family, a remote ancestor met a wandering Egyptian one afternoon and gave him real money for a deed to the Pyramids!

Thaddeus, with his ingenuous nature, got up from the divan, thinking that if Sarah wanted him to kiss her it must be because at last she loved him.

He gazed at her, fascinated.

It seemed to him that she was all that was desirable in a brunette—a vivid creature with arrogantly chiseled features, hair as black as black ink, lips as red as red ink, and eyes as indelible as indelible ink.

Before such definite radiance Thaddeus hesitated, doubting his luck. Sarah had never asked him to kiss her before, and he had never dared attempt it, for fear that such hardihood would bring him only mocking laughter from the red ink lips.

"Come over and kiss me," she said, "before I change my mind."

He stepped hastily to her side, and, bending over the chair where she sat balancing a teacup on her knee, met her upturned lips. For a long moment they clung to his. He came away dizzy from the contact, his mind swirling.

He dropped back upon the divan, marveling at Sarah's ability to keep the teacup still balanced on her knee at such a moment. With him it would have fallen and smashed in a thousand pieces!

Sarah showed disappointment.

"Thad!" she complained vivaciously. "You kiss like anybody else!"

His jaw dropped.

"What—what's the matter with it?"

"Oh, it's just a commonplace kiss. Nothing distinctive about it."

He sat facing her, bewildered.

"What—what do you expect?"

She surveyed him coolly, and at the end her gaze rested on his long, sensitive fingers—hands that would some day make him famous.

"From a young man as talented as you are," she said, "I expect something unusual. You play the piano like an angel—but you kiss like a country cousin! You have a touch of genius, but it never gets beyond your finger tips. Oh!" She flung up her head in despair. "Your whole temperament is like that, Thad. If only it weren't, I'd marry you!"

"You"—he leaned forward eagerly—"you would? Really, Sarah?" He was conscious that his heart was pounding fast. "That would be wonderful!"

"If only your temperament weren't like that, I said," she reminded him.

"What's wrong with my temperament?"

Her answer was emphatic.

"You haven't any!"

"Oh!" He fell back among the cushions.

"Thad," she continued, "it's my business to tell you what's wrong with you. Do you want to hear it?"

As he saw her lean forward intently he could almost feel her indelibly dark eyes writing vivid sentences on his brain. He was a little afraid of those sentences. Yet he knew he ought to heed them.

He knew that Sarah was right in saying that it was her business to advise him. She didn't call herself a press agent—the title on her stationery was "Councilor of Public Information"—but her business, which was highly successful, was to keep before the public, especially in the newspapers and preferably on the front page, a number of items, including two actors, a promising actress, a soap company, an association of churches engaged in raising a building fund, a dancing place, and a prize fighter.

Her range of subjects was wide, her motto: *"Liberté, Égalité, Publicity!"* Thaddeus was one of her clients, and his career as a concert pianist was being made known largely through her efforts, though so far the audiences he attracted left much to be desired and many empty seats.

"All right," he acquiesced. "Tell me."

"You're too ordinary," she began ruthlessly, and Thaddeus gasped. "There's nothing in your appearance or behavior to differentiate you from the mob. Your clothes are as inconspicuous as a bookkeeper's. Your hair is as short and as slick as a soda clerk's. Your speech is as unrevolutionary as a Sunday School superintendent's.

"You wear no mustache, you carry no

cane. You have no idiosyncrasies, no peculiarities, no fits of temperament—nothing that will ever get you the publicity you need to be rich and famous. Why, Thad, you're as ordinary as bread and butter!"

She got up and strode to the window, leaving Thaddeus still gasping.

"Bread and butter?" he echoed, at a loss. "What do you want me to be? I can't be what I'm not. I don't feel like kicking up a rumpus in public or wearing my hair like Paderewski."

She wheeled around suddenly.

"But the public expects it of a musician. What I want from you, Thad, is less bread and butter and a little more caviar."

She pointed out the window, past the neighboring office buildings.

"In this city," she went on, "there are half a dozen newspapers, but they'll never print more than a paragraph about you as long as you continue to be just a nice young man. You'll be a nice young man and a failure. And I won't marry a failure!"

He watched her, wide-eyed, as she came back and sat down in front of him. He believed every word she said, even though it hurt.

"What shall I do," he begged, "in order not to be bread and butter?"

"You must display an individuality. Otherwise you'll remain unnoticed, as colorless as—as Jane Platt."

At the mention of Jane he understood Sarah's meaning more distinctly, he thought.

Jane was a slender little thing, winsome and unobtrusive, with timid, mouse-colored eyes. Like Thaddeus, she was a pianist, and like him, too, she played to scant audiences. In fact, they had been drawn together by their empty seats.

"Jane is gifted," said Thaddeus.

"So are a hundred others!" returned Sarah.

"She has a great deal of quiet charm," he added, reflecting that there were moments when it was apparent that she was in love with him.

"Quiet charm!" scoffed Sarah. "Sweetness and light! But not the light of publicity."

"Well—" Thaddeus felt that he had gone far enough, perhaps, in his defense of Jane. "How do I go about getting this—this individuality?"

"Follow my instructions. First, your name, Thaddeus Wickliffe, is too long. It lacks punch in print. Cut off the final syllables and make it Thad Wick."

"Thad Wick!" he repeated protestingly. "Oh, Sarah, it sounds like an oil lamp."

"But people will remember it."

"Oh, I can't do that. Thaddeus Wickliffe is a name that's been in the family too long. How'd you like to have yours lopped off? Take the 'ah' off Sarah and the 'en' off Dineen, and what would you have left? Sardine!"

Sarah's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not a public performer," she retorted.

Then she smiled, and Thaddeus's thoughts raced with the sense of her beauty. It seemed to him that her smile was the most intensely personal tribute he had ever received.

True, he had seen her smile like that at other men, but for the moment he forgot to doubt its personal application. With her it was a question of laugh and the world laughs with you; smile, and they fall at your feet.

"We'll waive the business of the name," conceded Sarah, "but the other things you must do—"

"I will, Sarah, I will!" put in Thaddeus eagerly.

"You must raise a mustache. You must let your hair grow long and artistic. You must wear clothes that are different. Haven't you ever wanted to dress more fantastically? When you were a child, didn't you ever have fancies to which you gave play?"

"Yes, but I've suppressed them since then."

"You mustn't!"

"As a matter of fact, I've always envied Lord Hartington—you know, the Englishman who used to wear canary-colored trousers—and Eugene Sue, who wore a pink waistcoat."

"Fine! Wear both. And carry a cane—or, better yet, a curtain pole. Anything that

will call attention to you. Be temperamental in your talk and behavior. You're too even tempered. Haven't you ever wanted to throw a fit?"

"Well," he admitted, "there are a couple of critics I've wanted to throw somewhere."

"Let those feelings out. Cultivate a manner. Let things get on your nerves. Grab up your hat and walk out on people."

She went on to list a number of items which she prescribed for him, and conduct which she mapped out for a whole week in advance, all part of a definite publicity campaign. They went over the plans in detail. "You're such a dear, Thad, that I want to put you over big with the public."

"I think," said Thaddeus rather excitedly, as he bid her good-by at the door, "that I'd like to kiss you again."

"Good!" replied Sarah. "Your ideas are improving."

She went into his arms and received a kiss which made her step back at length, surprised.

"That's better!" she exclaimed, fixing her hair. "You're making progress already."

"Can't we announce our engagement now?" he asked.

"Not yet, Thad." She saw that his eyes were glowing brightly.

"Anyway, it wasn't commonplace that time, was it?"

"It was marvelous, Thad!"

He turned to the door, elated.

"From now on," he declared, "I'm through with the commonplace!"

"Come back Thursday," said Sarah, and closed the door after him.

II.

On Thursday, Thaddeus presented himself at Sarah's studio again. Nature had not yet had time to endow him with a mustache or an artistic excess of hair, but Thaddeus, with his latent powers of fantasy awakened, had done something sartorially which nature could not do.

His black felt hat was sloppily picturesque, his trousers were canary-colored, his vest pink. But what caused Sarah to cry out at him, astonished, was the thing in his hand. It was a curtain pole.

"You told me to carry a curtain pole," he replied. "I thought you meant it."

"Only figuratively, Thad."

"Well, I've been carrying it two days now, and I like it. I find that a curtain pole makes a very handy stick. The knob at one end just fits my sort of hand. The knob at the other end wards off taxicabs. And it does attract attention. Atwell, of the *Times*, saw me in the street and turned around to stare at me. He wasn't the only one."

"Fine!" approved Sarah. "Only I didn't think you'd go that far."

Thaddeus laughed shyly.

"It's sort of fun," he confessed.

Something boyishly playful had been liberated in him since he adopted Sarah's plans and specifications for the external trappings of genius. He turned to the window and gazed into the street, while Sarah sat down at her desk and thumbed a card index file, in which she had made some new entries under "Temperament, Thaddeus." She looked up and said:

"You must get a lot of color in your life."

"Color?" he repeated, still gazing into the street. "There's a red taxicab, but I don't like red. How about purple? I like purple. I've always wanted to do something with a big brush and a bucket of purple paint. I think I'll paint my own taxicab."

"Excellent idea!" Sarah nodded eagerly.

"I'll get a chauffeur to let me paint his car," went on Thaddeus. "I'll pay him a small amount of money, and promise to hire him every day for a short ride."

"And I'll send a photographer around to make a picture of you while you're painting the car. A picture for the Sunday papers. And now, about your next concert, can't you think of something to do there to cause talk? You know Jack Barrymore used to stop his performances sometimes to bawl out somebody in the audience for coughing."

"That wouldn't be fair," replied Thaddeus. "I've got a cold, too. But I'll think of something else. I'm getting to enjoy these little problems."

"All right Run along, now, Thad. I've got an appointment."

III.

A WEEK passed, and on Sunday Thaddeus had the pleasure of seeing his picture in the papers with the caption: "Pianist Paints Own Taxi. Can't Stand Prevailing Colors in Public Vehicles."

When he reported at Sarah's studio again he was met with the question:

"What did you do yesterday? Give me a full and accurate account of all your activities."

"Well, Sarah, I practiced two hours in the morning. Then I called my purple taxi and went to lunch."

"Where?"

"At the St. Elmo."

"Splendid! That's a good place to be seen. Did you lunch alone?"

"No. With Jane Platt."

"Oh, don't do that! Take some woman who is more striking, some one more colorful."

"But wouldn't that call attention to her —and away from me? Detract, you know?"

"Yes," reflected Sarah, "perhaps you're right. But go about with other persons, too. You're turning out to be a wonder in these things. You really are, Thad."

"It's all due to you, Sarah. For that you get a kiss."

He put his arms around her and held her close. The kiss impressed Sarah most favorably.

"Be careful, Thad," she warned; "if you grow too accomplished in this I'll begin to think you aren't true—that you're unfaithful to me."

"Oh, it was only a natural ardor.. The instinct of an artist."

She eyed him closely.

"You said that perfectly," she commented. "It sounded just the right note of temperament; almost soulful."

"Oh, I could keep that up all day. It's easy."

"Then do it, by all means. We're getting on. I've got a reporter on the *Sun* coming around to interview you to-morrow. Have something snappy to say to her. I expect to increase your box office receipts at the next series of concerts. Pretty soon I'll begin taking my percentage as salary. Business is business, you know."

"Of course."

IV.

IN December Thaddeus gave a series of three concerts. At the first he carried his curtain pole onto the stage with him. It was talked about. At the second he got up from the piano in the middle of the recital and walked to the footlights, where he announced:

"I will *not* play number four on the program. It is a composition in which I feel there is a heavy, sticky quality, too much like the weather to-night."

He paused and ran his fingers through his hair, which had now grown out, providing sufficient length for his fingers to follow slow, thoughtful divagations through it. His posture in front of the footlights was effective—a figure swayed by a sudden gust of emotion.

"Instead of the Beethoven piece I will play a composition of my own, entitled 'The Wind Knows Me in April.' I will go back to the Beethoven opus at some future concert, when there is less humidity in the air."

A buzz of comment ran around the hall. Simmonds, the conservative *Tribune* critic, gave Thaddeus more space in his review the next day than he had ever accorded to him before, concluding by saying:

"Such a display of temperament would have been inexcusable in one less talented than Mr. Wickliffe. But his gifts are undeniable. There was a spirit in his playing, an *élan,* which made the evening one of the musical events of the week. The public seems to be slow in recognizing that in him there is an artist of great promise and already considerable fulfillment."

The second concert had been better attended than the first, and when the third came the audience showed a still further increase in numbers and enthusiasm. The hall was two-thirds full—a record for a a Thaddeus Wickliffe recital—and in the first row of the balcony, leaning forward

with elbows on the railings, was the slim, attentive figure of Jane Platt.

She sat with her turban in her lap, her gaze fixed upon Thaddeus. She had brown hair that was bobbed, but it was flat on top and short in back—not bushed out in the early New Zealand manner which first swept over the heads of the western world and which still claimed its waves of popularity.

If Thaddeus could have seen her at the moment when he finished his Chopin nocturne, he would have changed his opinion about her timid, mouse-colored eyes. They were shining brightly, though wet with tears.

Jane was so deeply in love with Thaddeus that his music moved her beyond all reason. In her heart it touched a sadness born of the fact that Thaddeus had not been to see her for weeks and weeks.

At the end of the concert the applause was so great that Thaddeus had to take several more bows than usual. When he came out into the street Jane was waiting at the stage door to speak to him.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," she said, as he shook her hand.

Instead of looking at her he turned his head as if searching for some one else.

"I've been so busy getting a temperament—" he began, and then caught himself.

"Getting what?"

"Oh, nothing—I forgot what I was saying. I'm distracted to-night. Excuse me. What was it you asked?"

Jane winced.

"I was wondering why you don't come around to see me and play duets with me any more."

"I've been too busy, Jane. We'll go to lunch some day, soon. At the St. Elmo." His gaze, which had been roving about through the crowd, finally came to rest on the figure of Sarah Dineen, pushing her way toward him.

"I see," said Jane. She was hurt, but managed not to show it.

"Here's Sarah," said Thaddeus. "I promised to meet her here."

For a moment the three of them stood together, talking. Beside the tall, vivid person of Sarah, Jane felt as inconspicuous as a child in front of a traffic tower flashing red and green lights. Then she said good-by and turned away, biting her lip to keep the tears back.

"Thad," said Sarah, her arm in his as they went down the street together, "you played divinely to-night. But I don't think you ought to be so tricky with your costume on the stage. In the street it's all right. But at a recital you ought to stick to conventional garb. Those straps on the bottom of your dress trousers are a little too much."

Thaddeus stopped her abruptly.

"Too much!" he exclaimed, and went on to protest: "An artist must dress as he feels. Let them call it temperament or what they will! These straps are the sort, I admit, which Uncle Sam wears in the traditional portraits of him, but I wear them for a utilitarian reason. They keep my trousers from hitching up when I make a bow. I've noticed that nothing is more ridiculous than to see a performer bow to his audience and get his trousers stuck halfway up his legs. It takes their mind off his music. By the way, make a note of that, Sarah, and get some reporter to print it."

She nestled close and pressed his arm enthusiastically.

"Thad! You're priceless. One more audience like to-night's, and you'll be made."

V.

THAT one more audience of which Sarah spoke assembled on an afternoon in February in sufficient proportions, not to pack the house, but to assure Thaddeus of a growing interest in his recitals and an enduring public.

Sarah was satisfied. Her work was done. When she went to the stage door after the recital, to walk with Thaddeus to her studio for a cup of tea in celebration, she was gratified to note the crowd of admirers who had gathered and who were waiting to catch a near view of him.

Elderly women shared the sidewalk with sweet young things, who exclaimed at Thaddeus's appearance, and whispered

about him in loud tones. It was a triumph.

To Sarah's surprise Thaddeus suddenly halted at the curb, and stood as if rooted to the spot.

"I can't walk this afternoon," he complained with an air of languor that could only be ascribed to something akin to old-world weariness.

"The streets oppress me," he went on, waving his arms in an elaborately fervent gesture. "Crowds are sponges. Faces seemed to sop up all his spirituality. They are like blotting paper!"

Sarah stared at him, wide-eyed. He was intensely serious.

"Now, Thad—" she began to protest, but he interrupted her.

"Where is my purple cab?" he demanded, raising his voice. "My purple cab!" he shouted. "Ah, here it is."

He pushed Sarah into the taxi that drew up and got in with the same strange mood upon him, now ambiguously philosophical, now vaguely excited, a condition in which Sarah found him still persisting when they reached her studio and she began to get the tea things together.

"Thad," she urged, "don't talk so cryptically. And, for Heaven's sake, stop pacing the floor like a caged lion! You don't have to be temperamental with me, you know."

"Temperamental?" he echoed. "Who's temperamental?"

"You are."

He faced her with hands outspread beseechingly.

"I am myself, Sarah. If there are cosmic forces whose rhythm I feel desperately to-day, it is not I who seek them. They force themselves into my soul. What am I to do?"

"Be yourself!" Sarah banged the teapot on the table, exasperated.

"Myself?" Thaddeus's voice rose dramatically. "I *am* myself."

"You weren't anybody until I told you to be. You were bread and butter six months ago."

"Don't shout at me like that, Sarah," he reproved her. "My nerves won't stand it. I'm sensitive. Call it temperament or what you will!"

Slowly she put down the things in her hands and advanced toward Thaddeus, her eyes fixed intently upon him, queerly, half menacingly.

"Do you mean to say," she demanded in deliberate stages of amazement, "that you are acting naturally with me? That these words and these gestures are your own? And not the part that I taught you to play?"

Thaddeus stared at her.

"I don't know who taught me," he insisted, "but if it's a part, then I am that part. Nothing else."

"You don't know who taught you? Well, I do. *I* did it!"

"Ah, Sarah, let's not have words over this. What does it matter, after all?" He waved his hand in an expansive gesture of generosity.

"Dear, funny boy!" She went close to him, radiantly close. "The next item that I give the newspapers about you will be the announcement of your engagement."

Thaddeus gave a start.

"My engagement?"

"Yes. To me."

"To you?" he echoed, and added, "You can't!"

"Why not? It will be news."

"It will be bigamy! I'm married already. This afternoon, before the concert. I married Jane. Good heavens, that reminds me, I mustn't keep her waiting for dinner. She's at the hotel now."

Sarah sank into her chair dumfounded.

"You—married—Jane Platt! That colorless creature—"

"Stop!" commanded Thaddeus, and grabbed up his hat. "I know how you feel about her. You think she's just bread and butter. That's the reason I love her. When I was bread and butter myself, I thought I loved you, Sarah." He turned to the door and paused to add: "But now my temperament demands a wife like Jane. Maybe I'm caviar. Who knows? Anyhow, I'm happy!"

And he went out the door whistling gayly.

THE END

That Old Southern Feeling

By E. K. MEANS

THE "Big Four" of Tickfall sat in deliberative session in the rear room of the Hen-scratch soft drink emporium. Their elbows rested upon a cheap pine table, their feet scuffed the sawdust upon the floor; they scratched matches on the under side of the table, kept their tobacco burning and sighed in deep dejection.

"I never seed things so dull in Tickfall," the Rev. Vinegar Atts remarked. "Dar ain't been a scandal in high cullud circles for a month."

"Dar ain't been a fight in low cullud circles fer two months," Skeeter Butts added. "No quorls, no furses, no scraps—eve'ybody lovin' eve'ybody else—puffeck peace."

"Dar ain't been a death, white or black, in no circles, fer three months," Pap Curtain, the grave-digger, mourned. "It 'pears like eve'ybody in Tickfall is gwine live ferever."

"I picked up one little dab of news down at the railroad deppo dis mawnin'," Figger Bush remarked. "Mebbe us kin squeeze a little juice outen dat."

"Whut come to pass?" Vinegar asked.

"Tampa Strate is come back to town," Figger told them.

The three men sat and looked at Figger. His news item caused no more uproar than three tadpoles would make in a mud puddle.

"Well—commence!" Skeeter snapped impatiently. "Tampa is come—you say he is?"

"Ginny Babe Chew knowed his favor an' his face as soon as he arrived off de train," Figger proceeded.

The three men evinced a little more interest. Ginny Babe was a scandalmonger. She knew where every family in town kept their family skeleton. Nothing delighted her more than to drive nails in a moribund reputation.

"You say he come back—or just come?" Pap Curtain asked.

"Back!" Figger told him. "Twenty year ago he skedaddled away. Now he has moseyed back."

"Ef he done anything dat he hadn't oughter Ginny Babe will see dat his ole reputation oozes out," Skeeter snapped. "Lawd, how dat ole woman is got Skeeter skeart."

"She's got somepin on Tampa," Figger told them. "Dem little pig eyes of her'n turned green as grass when she seen dat little runty Cajan nigger git off de train."

"Mebbe dar'll be a scandal in high sawsiety cullud circles," Vinegar said hopefully.

"Mebbe dar'll be a fight in low cullud circles," Skeeter anticipated eagerly.

"I hope dar'll be a fun'ral in some kind of circle," Pap sighed. "Times is hard an' a grave-digger always has to wait an' see whut sick folks aims to do. Waitin' fer folks to die is slow wuck, an' all de doctors is agin yo' trade, and de sick people ain't eager to he'p yo' make a livin' by dyin' fer yo' sake."

"I kinder soupspicioned from de way Ginny Babe acted dat de fun'ral tuck place about twenty year ago," Figger said. "Dat's how come Tampa made hisself absent."

"One fun'ral leads to another," Pap remarked hopefully. "My business is lookin' up."

"Did Ginny Babe specify whut Tampa done?" Vinegar asked.

"Not so I could git it real clear in my mind," Figger told them. "De white folks is mixed up in it. It 'pears like it had somepin to do wid ole Gabe Manse's boy."

"Huh! I remember dat boy," Vinegar Atts broke in. "De one dey calls Everett hippety-hopped on crutches when he wus a little feller. He ain't noways crippled now, but I toted him to school on my back one time when I met up wid him crutchin' it along."

"Bless Gawd! Dis news is got a real punch to it!" Skeeter exulted. "Dat coon is slipped back in town hopin' nobody won't know him, or hopin' de white folks is done fergot. Us 'll expe'unce joy watchin' de come-out. Mebbe he crippled Everett up—or somepin like dat."

"Hold on, fellers!" Pap Curtain snarled as he pressed his hand hard against his forehead. "I kin remember somepin about all dat. Dis little Cajan nigger called Tampa useter play wid Everett Manse. You knows how a little white boy an' a little black boy teams up and loves each other forever."

"Shore!" Skeeter agreed. "Eve'y little nigger boy in dis town is got a white boy runnin' wid him an' waitin' on him—feedin' him all-day suckers an' cigareets. Dey loves each other better dan brudders—dey lie fer each other an' dey would die fer each other."

"Suttinly! Me an' a white boy played together when he wus little an' we is good friends till yit. Las' Christmas dat feller sont me a new suit of long-tail preachin' clothes, an' dis here high-top, stove-pipe, silk-lined, money-collectin' hat, an' twenty dollars!" Vinegar Atts proclaimed, his voice lyrical in praise of a friend who was a noted New Orleans lawyer.

"Well, suh, Tampa an' Everett Manse must hab fussed an' fell out," Pap continued. "I reckon Tampa bust him up some way an' had to cut an' run fer his life."

"All right, fellers," Skeeter said, as they all rose to their feet to disperse for the day. "We'll snoop around and find out what happened an' whut Ginny Babe knows, an' git ready to hear de big bust when de blow-off comes."

Then with one accord they all resumed their seats.

Tampa Strate had entered the room.

II.

TAMPA walked to the table and addressed the man who wore the high hat.

"Is you de Revun Vinegar Atts?" he asked.

"Yes, suh," Vinegar replied. "I's de pasture of de Shoo-fly church an' a good nigger."

"I needs yo' church an' yo' profess'nal services," Tampa told him. "I wants to git married."

"Son, dat's good news!" Vinegar howled. "A little five dollar weddin' fee will keep me in cheap stogies for two months. I is yo' humble an' obedient servant, suh."

"Ef eve'ything goes off easy I'll make de fee ten dollars, revun," Tampa said.

"Lawd, you shore is a noble nigger man!"

Vinegar bellowed. "A double fee like dat will be enough to git my wife a new dress—ef she hears about it. I hopes you an' me won't mention yo' lib'ral donation. Whut you mean by wantin' eve'ything to go off easy. I'll shore grease de rails an' slide things along, ten dollars wuth! Set down an' tell us yo' troubles."

Tampa seated himself in a chair beside them, rested his elbows on the table, and glanced uneasily at the four men. Then his anxiety seemed to vanish, a reminiscent gleam came into his black eyes, and his easy-smiling mouth twitched with recollections of the past as he looked from one to the other.

"Twenty years ago I knowed Skeeter when he wus a little yeller dude barkeep'," Tampa grinned. "He went out in de woods wid a lot of hunters and dey passed de hat an' tuck up a collection eve'y mawnin' to buy Skeeter a coffin. Dey hid de sum tee-total in a box in de cabin."

"I remembers dat," Skeeter chuckled. "I didn't onderstand whut dey wus buyin' a coffin fer me fer when I was still livin' an' I wus skeart dey would kill me at last an' put me in de coffin dey wus buyin'. I lit out."

"I knowed Pap long ago, too," Tampa continued. "I reckoleck when he wus diggin' de well behime de cotehouse an' had her down about fawty foot. Some white boys tin-canned a dawg's tail an' de dawg run forward lookin' back at de can, an' fell in de well on top of Pap."

"Suttinly," Pap agreed. "Me an' dat dawg suttinly did make a noise wid our mouths dat day."

"I reckoleck Vinegar when him an' a lot of yuther members of de Nights of Darkness Lodge sot up wid dat dead man whut come to life an' riz up in his coffin," Tampa continued.

"Shore!" Vinegar whooped. "Lawd, honey! I come through de winder widout raisin' de sash an' loped acrosst a cornfield wid dat sash aroun' my neck like a collar. I got my legs straddle of a corn-row an' tore down mo' corn dan I is planted since dat day come off an' dat happenstance happened."

"And I remembers you, Figger," Tampa laughed. "I reckoleck when de white boys tuck you down to de wagon shop an' painted yo' wool wid red wagon paint an' den gib a show an' abbertized a red-headed nigger crossed wid a wood-pecker. Dey charged one cent per each to see you."

"Dem wus de good ole days," Figger laughed. And then he asked. "How come we don't remember nothin' about you?"

"I warn't but nine year ole when I skunt out from dis town," Tampa replied. "Me an' a little white boy wus playin' together an' de little white boy got hurt an' I knowed I never could esplain nothin' to de white folks, so I went whar dey couldn't ax no questions."

"You figger you is too ole now fer de Manse white folks to reckernize you," Pap suggested.

"Yes, suh."

"You hadn't oughter took no chances," Pap warned him.

"I know it warn't safe," Tampa agreed. "But, you see, when I wus a little pickaninny I use to go to de Shoo-fly church an' hear de Revun Vinegar Atts explavicate his sermont, an' I kinder figgered I would like to git married in dat church."

"Dat's right," Vinegar declared. "Yo' notion does you credick fer a sensible-thinkin' man. We is all yo' friends an' we will git you married in dat church ef we have to marry you at midnight in de dark wid de lights turned out so nobody won't know who you is."

"I don't expect no trouble," Tampa said, in a tone which belied his words. "I hopes dat jes' a strange cullud pusson comin' in, an' steppin' off in mattermony won't make such a splash with white folks dat I'll git shot up or put in jail."

"Huh!" Vinegar suddenly grunted. "I done fergot to ax you who de gal wus you is cravin' to marry."

"Her name is Weasil Box," Tampa told them.

"My Lawd!" Vinegar exclaimed. "Dat Weasil Box is de cook in de kitchen of Mr. Gabe Manse."

"I knows it," Tampa said in what was almost a whisper.

"An' dat Manse boy wus de brat you busted up," Pap remarked.

"Yes, suh."

"Us is got to rally 'round, niggers," Skeeter said earnestly. "Dis noble man's life is in danger."

"Ain't it so?" Pap Curtain, the grave-digger, snarled. "My bizzness is shore pickin' up!"

III.

"'TAIN'T gwine be so easy to pull off a public-private weddin'," Rev. Vinegar Atts remarked as he sat with his other friends under a chinaberry tree in the rear of the Hen-scratch.

"I reckin not," Skeeter agreed. "Public in de church fer niggers only, private fer whites so dey won't know nothin' at all about it. You is shore got a job to make you earn yo' ten-dollar fee."

"You see, Tampa is got to git dem weddin' licenses an' dat means dat white folks axes you who you is, whar you bawn at, who is yo' maw 'n' paw—an' dey writes it all down in a big book fer de gran' jury to look at."

"White folks cain't do nothin' widout writin' wid a pen in a big book," Figger observed disgustedly.

"Fu'thermo', dat Weasil Box is aimin' to put on consid'able style," Vinegar continued.

"Shore! Dat church is all decorooted like a fun'ral wus gwine on," Pap Curtain declared. "She sont me out in de woods wid a wagon an' I fotch in miles of bamboo vines, switch canes, palmetter an' all dat sort of truck. She's fixin' up a little greenhouse to stand in like Abraham an' Jacob in de garden of Edom."

"You means Cain an' Abel in de garden of Edim," Skeeter corrected.

"You bofe means Adam an' Eve in de garden," Vinegar declared.

"I done fergot all de Sunday school I ever knowed," Pap growled. "All I remembers real good is dat Enoch went to heaven widout bein' buried fust—cheated de grave-digger outen de price of a grave."

"Looky here, revun," Figger Bush piped up. "When de last man dies, who is gwine bury him?"

"Aw, shut up an' git still, all you niggers!" Vinegar howled, mopping the sweat from his big bald head with a big red handkerchief. "Here I is, tryin' to start a weddin' to-night an' you blacks is gone clean back to de garden of Eden to start yo' talk an' is tryin' to wind up when de last man dies."

"De garden of Edom is de fust place a marriage come off," Skeeter snickered. "An' when de las' man dies, de last woman is gwine die a ole maid."

"Is de Tickfall quawtet gwine sing to-night?" Vinegar asked.

"Suttinly," Skeeter said. "Us three voices is in it. You cain't sing an' be de preacher, too, so we done axed Hitch Diamond to be de heavy bass in yo' place."

Thereupon the three voices broke into tuneful harmony, and began to rehearse for their appearance that evening:

"Way down in my heart I got a feelin' fer you,
Ef you say de word, I'll go stealin' fer you,
Ef we two should part, I'd be kneelin' to you,
Because I've got a sneaky fe-elin' fer you-
oo-oo-oo-oo!"

In other parts of the town, the preparations for the wedding proceeded with no particular regard for privacy. If an effort is made to hide something, everybody becomes curious and the publicity of the big wedding at the Shoo-fly church was the best protection from suspicion for the one fearful contracting party.

His name meant nothing, his past was forgotten, he was merely the bridegroom at the wedding, and such a character part on such occasions has always been the least thing there is.

The old cotton warehouse by the sand-pit was hung with lanterns for the big dance. Down in the sand-pit, barbecued meats were sending forth enticing odors and around the edge of the pit a circle of little colored boys and their dogs sniffled and scuffled, not daring to come nearer because old Isaiah Gaitskill, the barbecue expert, told them that he would kill them and put them on the fire with the rest of the meat.

He spoke with great conviction, and he assured them that he already had two little nigger boys and a dog baking over the flames.

In many of the yards around the cabins, garments were drying upon the clothes-lines and within the habitations could be heard the thump of smoothing irons as the colored ladies prepared their apparel for the evening festivities.

And the old Shoo-fly church, dilapidated, weather-beaten, like a leprous beggar sitting in the sun, was the scene of hurry and bustle, of stepladders and tack-hammers, of stretched cotton sheets and gaudy ribbon.

And as the serpent entered Eden, so appeared the serpent here in the form of Ginny Babe Chew, a fat, vicious, ugly, toothless old woman, whose little pig eyes glowed always with malice and whose tongue was agleam with quick lightnings.

She came to Everett Manse's law office, filling the door and obscuring the light of day that had streamed through that aperture. Ginny was a black cloud and a sign of coming storm wherever she appeared.

"Mawnin', Marse Everett! Is you gwine to de nigger weddin' to-night?"

"No."

"You had oughter go, young marster," Ginny Babe replied in a persuasive tone. "De coon whut is gittin' married to you-all's cook ain't been in dese parts fer twenty years, an' you oughter wish to see him agin."

"Who is he?" Everett asked.

"You remember de little nigger boy whut busted yo' back an' laid you on de bed fer mighty nigh a year an' sont you cripplin' aroun' on yo' little crutches fer two year longer? Hurt you an' den runned away?"

"I remember him," Everett said.

"Well, suh, he snuck back in town about two days ago an' he's gittin' married to-night to yo' paw's cook. Yes, suh!"

"I'm glad you told me, Ginny," Everett said after a moment's thought. "I'll be at the wedding."

IV.

THERE were not many colored people in Tickfall who were not at the wedding that night. The big, barnlike church would seat one thousand people; but the windows were open on both sides and wagons had been drawn up beside the church and many people perched upon the wheel-hubs or stood in the wagon-beds and looked in upon the scene.

The Tickfall quartet came to the church by sundown when the people began to assemble, and they nearly sang themselves to death entertaining the audience until the wedding party arrived.

They sang old plantation melodies which throbbed with the memories of other days, and then they began the more dignified music set to the wedding march and the procession moved slowly up the aisle to stand before the Rev. Vinegar Atts.

Only one white man was present, and he had been especially invited by Ginny Babe Chew.

Everett Manse stood just inside the door with his back to the wall and gazed upon the many familiar faces which he had known from earliest childhood. He listened with amused interest to a low-toned conversation just outside of the door:

"Bob, dese here pants I'm got on is de best pants I'm ever had. Dey has lasted me three years, an' excusin' a couple of patches on de seat whar dey don't show, dese here pants is jes' as good as dey ever wus."

"Dese here pants of mine is better dan yourn, son," the other man answered. "Now, me, I bought dese pants when I got married an' dey done outlasted my married life. My wife is done left me an' run off wid another nigger man, but my pants is still wid me. I'm got my pants on, but my wife is off."

Vinegar's great voice was booming the stately sentences of the wedding ceremony, and his rising tones soon drowned out all lesser sounds of conversation:

"Dearly beloved, we is assemble together in de presence of dese witnesses to unite dis man an' dis woman in holy matrimony, which is a honorable estate institooted by Gawd in de time of man's innocency an' not by any to be enterprised or taken in hand onadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly an' in de fear of Gawd. Therefo', ef any of you knows any jus' cause why dis man an' dis woman should not be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace!"

This was Everett Manse's cue to come up-stage and start a rough-house and Ginny Babe was so sure he was waiting for this moment of invitation that she rose from her seat, her face joyful with malicious anticipation, and looked back to where Everett stood with his back to the wall.

But Everett let this golden opportunity slip by and Ginny was dazed for a moment, and stood wondering when he planned to pull off the explosion.

"Down in front!" an angry voice hissed, and Babe sank down in her seat, glaring at the speaker with a mental resolution to lead him to the slaughter at some future and more convenient time.

Everett looked at the back of the little negro man who stood beside the woman at the altar and two decades of his life rolled back like a scroll. He saw Tampa Strate as his little colored playmate, as active and mischievous as a monkey, as friendly as a puppy, as witty as a king's fool, and his own devoted friend and willing slave.

He saw himself and his little friend together, two boys, swimming in the Mississippi River despite the prohibition of their parents; smoking corn-silk, or rattan stolen from buggy cushions, "life everlasting," and finally, tobacco; sampling everything there was to eat in woods and fields, in cupboards and pantry; robbing birds' nests, "popping" lizards, killing snakes, trapping rabbits—oh, it was a long record of the infinite joys of boyhood, rich with the memories of the gentle, rather shy, friendliness of the little black boy who was now the man standing at the altar of the church.

Then a sharp pain which was purely reminiscent shot through the straight back which touched the wall and he recalled the tragedy which had separated him from his friend for twenty years:

A grapevine swing in the woods—the little negro making a mighty effort to push his white companion up to where his bare foot could touch a certain limb of the tree which marked the greatest height attainable—a ripping, tearing sound among the branches overhead, a broken strand of the vine—his body hurled out as from a sling and falling flat on his back on the marsh grass.

The little negro boy ran whimperingly home and told his mother of the tragedy. She placed him upon the first train which went through the village and sent him away, and then reported the accident.

Manse was found lying unconscious in the woods, lay for one year on his back upon the bed, moved clumsily upon crutches for two years more, spent the time with books and became a great student; recovered entirely from his injuries, and now in superb manhood, promised to be one of the great lawyers of the State.

"I now pronounces you man an' wife!" Vinegar boomed.

Then Dazzle Zenor, at the organ, began the recessional which brought the new bridegroom ever nearer to the man who had been so grievously injured in their play twenty years before.

Once more Ginny Babe Chew took hope. Everett had been waiting for this moment. He would kill Tampa as he passed out of the door. She arose and faced the exit, determined to miss no detail of the murder.

Tampa, walking with bowed head, did not look up until he was near the exit, and then he looked straight into the eyes of Everett Manse. Manse stretched out his right arm, and when Tampa touched it, he found himself in the strong embrace—of friendliness, and a love which had survived all injuries and the absence of the years.

"Good old Tamp," Everett said in a tone charged with feeling. "I am delighted to see you again and I am glad of the chance to come to your wedding."

"Gawd bless you, Marse Everett," Tampa sobbed, as the tears spurted from his eyes. "Dis am de happiest day in my whole endurin' life."

"I'm married, Tamp," Everett said. "And now you are, too. Let's start out together again! I know Weasil can cook, and I know you can work, and my wife is Lois who used to throw rocks at us because we teased her—and my servant house is empty and is waiting for you both."

The two men smiled at each other. Only death would ever separate them again.

THE END

The Return

By KATHARINE HAVILAND TAYLOR

THAT small section of the social world who knew Anne Rush and Anthony Durrell were uncommonly surprised when they became engaged. Tony had a seat on the Exchange, the deep wrinkles of much frank laughter around his eyes, a booming voice, common sense, and what is called "business vision" by the Babbits who inclined to poesy. He could outdrink any drinker of his set, too, and his was the sort of set who prefaced and punctuated all controversy with "a drink."

Anne looked as if she had been born of an autumn twilight and a fairy. She had a shy, soft, hesitating little voice, no common sense, and dreams in her eyes; and her clothes were always lacking a button.

She wrote poetry, real poetry, and she was always losing one glove. In the theater, things dropped from her lap. You know her? Scattering, breathless, undefinably sweet—lovable, so lovable—a creature of moods made of April rains and cloudless May moons.

Natural, then, that the crowd should say, "Anne—Tony! Good Heaven! What will drop when he comes home wanting a steak and finds—violets?"

It promised that way. It seemed a joke, and the violet substitute for steak and the various other hypotheses, made matter for much laughter.

Anne herself felt the match to be unsuitable. She said breathlessly: "Tony, you think you can keep in step through the week days?"

He asked her to explain. (Their intercourse was a matter of much translating).

"I mean," she told him, "that this is simple. The French say, 'To-day's delicious sweet of love is to-morrow's nourishing soup,' and to keep soups uniformly good is sometimes difficult. This thing we have changes. Now, it is easy for you to forgive me so much, but living with me—?"

Tony, who was growing a sort of imagination, drew a deep breath. He closed his broad hand around Anne's until she winced, and wincing, smiled. She wanted hurt from him; that much she loved him.

"I think," he said a little thickly, "that I'll be able to stick it."

Anne found that without translation. And for a moment she rested her cheek against his arm, although they were in a theatre, and the stage was so lit that it threw forth a glare that was unkind to lovers.

She sat erect. He whispered, "*Don't move!*" Her eyes told him she did not want to move. "But I am still there!" she said, sitting so from him that she could face him.

"I know it," he told her.

"Do you feel me?" she questioned.

"I feel you," he answered.

She smiled; he smiled and caught a deeper breath.

"That much I have taught you." She spoke in so low a tone that he would have missed if he had not learned every cadence of Anne's voice. Then she turned eyes to the stage. He did not. He sat looking down on her soft hair that held so many lights; that changed so with day and weather.

She had said, he remembered, "I know I should not belong to you, but I do. I feel it; do you?"

That was early in their engagement; it had made him laugh. He had called her "an imaginative baby," and added: "No, I don't feel you belonging to me, but I shall *see* that you belong to me. I am built that way."

Then he had told her of how he had conquered a bad situation that morning. It was a tale of slyness and "business wisdom;" a tale that could have been made possible only by "the man who was *there, awake; on the job!*"

Her clear eyes had held to his gently as he narrated his modern saga. When he stopped she said: "That is interesting, Tony, but scheming has nothing to do with my loving."

"It hasn't?" he asked, smiling derisively. (He *thought* he knew "how to manage 'em.")

"No. I love you because I feel my heart beating with yours—all the time—day and night."

And now he knew a little of that; he was beginning to feel a hint of the immense truth which is beyond the telling; of waves as yet unexplored; of dreams that hint themselves through meshes of haze, but he clung with tenacious, hard, material grip to the things he knew. Laughed at Anne gently—gently. Worshiped her. Hoped, a little, that there would come a day when a certain look from her would not start cramp in his throat, and send a sting to his eyes. He was, he told her often, "a little too damned gone!"

II.

THEN the war came and with it the happening that few, even of those close to Anne, will ever know, and that fewer would credit.

Tony Durrell went over as a captain; and, because of his courage and his wit and his tennis and golf-hardened muscles, and his American brag, and his training in *finesse* and slyness, he did well among other men who did well. He did very well indeed.

Yet laurels were a weak panacea for the endless stretch of same-faced days; for the smells, the privations, the loneliness and the feeling of—uncertainty.

There was hunger, there was filth, there was death; and against those things and for those things were two forms of forgetting.

Tony, being what he was and living as he had before he knew Anne, took both forms of anæsthetic on various occasions. And here begins the story. Anne stuck to him.

He left Colette; shaken, weak, reeling, he staggered out in the darkened street of a small French village—ashamed. God! Anne! Anne!

He staggered to the steps of a little house that gave to a narrow way, and because of the months that were past, the horrors of them and the betrayal they had led him to, Tony cried as he had never cried before, and then he felt her.

She sat down by him, and he felt her cheek against his shoulder. He held his breath (he told me this, himself) afraid to move. She did not speak, yet—he heard her words; he said her voice was in his mind, as clearly hers as it would have been had

she put it there by sending it to him through his ears.

"I belong to you," she said. "My heart still beats—all the time—day and night, day and night—with yours."

And from thence onward, and for quite a time, considering the way and strain of things, Tony was "good."

Then—the morning of the Armistice, when men knew what was coming and shook from it; when they stood in the trenches with tears making little white paths on their dirty cheeks; when light feeling boys blatted loudly of home, and those who had starved for home spoke not at all.

And at that time Tony decided to straighten his line; a few more feet and it would be even, and the staff would approve. A glorious end! So he sent his men out and over the top. And between two trees that were nothing more than shredded stumps which reached piercingly upward, he "lost" quite a number.

But he knew nothing of that, then nor afterward; for no more than the illusion of Anne came to him then. He saw her walking between the boy who had—at night—cried his wife's name in his sleep; between this boy and one who had whimpered in his fright, "Mother!"

He saw her walking thus, away from him. He screamed, shrilly, maddened, "*Look out!*"—for there was the hiss of shrapnel.

But it came down and through her, and burrowed deep in the churning earth, and, untouched, she went on.

III.

This much he told me, who served under him in his regiment and who at home was his friend. The rest I heard from Anne, and deduced from the emptiness he showed me in his life.

Tony came home, glorious, praised, a hero; loth, with many another better, truer hero, to talk of "It;" and there was much petting of him, and then pitying of him. Anne had dismissed him. She confessed she did not know why. She only knew, she said, on the day of the Armistice, that she did not—any more—belong to him.

"My heart has stopped beating with with yours," she said.

Tony—who was in the sedate drawing room of the house which belonged to Anne's sedate aunt—Tony asked: "Do you love me?"

"Very much," she answered.

"I slipped over there," he went on.

She did not understand; the clear eyes she shifted to him told him so. He explained with, "Women—"

"Oh—well!" she said, and so dismissed that.

"I have kissed many lips, but no other fingers but yours—" he continued, desperately earnest.

"I know," she told him.

"If you can forgive that—"

"It is not a matter of forgiveness, nor of loving," she interposed. "It is a matter of being with you. I was with you, and I have walked away. I don't know why, nor where I have gone, but I am no longer with you."

"There is no other place where my head can ever rest—ever really rest—but above your heart," he pleaded.

"I know," she said.

"Kiss me!" he ordered, and she would have kissed him, but his kisses came first upon her lips—brutal, bruising, hungry, desperate.

And after the storm he raised his head, tears on his cheeks, hard lines between brows, and by his lips; and she said, "You see, Tony?" and she threw out her hands. She was gone.

So he left her. But before he left her he had found out, and he was certain he had found out truly, that she knew nothing of what had happened the morning of that glorious day when the end was near, and when Captain Anthony Durrell added to his distinguished service the honor of regaining four feet of ground which had been lost to the American army the night before.

IV.

Now what is left may be credited or not; but Tony Durrell is not a dreamer, and a lie would show in the eyes of Anne Rush as clearly as would tears.

She said she knew nothing of the happenings on the morning when she felt her heart tear loose from his. But—she wrote a poem that started with, " There were two trees—"

And it told of a boy who had dreamed of the arms of his wife, and of another who had hungered for his mother—and it told of their dying—I hoped Tony would not find it, but he did.

He said to me, dully: " There is a lot you can't explain, isn't there?"

" One should know it," I ventured, " with every breath we draw full of unreleased sound. One should know it when we stagger from the crudest first showing of traveling voice. Why not traveling thought?"

He nodded somberly.

A year, and he went to France. And he hunted the trees, which, oddly enough, still stood.

When he came back to the States he sought me out, and in a quiet corner of a quiet club he told me this: he had sat down, and he had waited, and the old torn ground had returned, and the hiss of shrapnel; and she had come toward him, arms out, eyes full of tears, lips smiling.

As he finished I said, " You know she's dead?"

" When I got back to Paris," he answered, " I found a cable from her aunt. She died that morning."

There's a good deal one can't explain. This true story is one of the things one can't explain. On the other hand—and among the things one can explain—is Tony. Hard liver, stiff player, " keen business man "—who in the midst of everything—anything—may any time break off to draw unto himself, and so—sit—seeming to wait—wait.

One of the feminine mob one night in my presence said, " But, dear Captain Durrell, weren't you ever afraid of—*dying?*"

" I wasn't afraid of dying," he answered. And to me he added, again, " I'm not afraid of dying. You see—she is—coming toward me."

THE END

The above belongs to the so-called " different " type of story. We should be glad to have our readers' reactions to fiction of this sort which we printed more frequently in years past than we have of late. THE EDITOR.

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I never see—
Many a right purty thing
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